



nature publishing group



Should public perceptions about the benefits of genetic research influence how scientists focus their work? This was a question raised at a meeting earlier this year that brought together two groups of geneticists — those who work directly on disease genetics and those whose aim is to answer more ‘basic’ questions using plant and animal models. Perhaps unsurprisingly, two different answers came from the discussion. On the one hand, some scientists feel the need to make their work directly relevant to the public, given that most funding comes from taxpayers. But the results that directly affect people’s lives — whether in the form of a new genetic test for a disease or a more robust crop — do not come out of a vacuum. Years or decades of research lie behind many breakthroughs that make the headlines, often answering a series of ‘smaller’ questions that might not seem important to a non-scientist.

So perhaps it would be better to focus on a different but related question: how can we enhance the public understanding of genetic research? In the Science and Society article on page 223 of this issue, Susanne Haga provides an overview of online resources that are aimed at educating the general public — as well as students and health professionals — about a range of topics in genetics, from basic concepts to ethical issues. The ease of using and accessing the internet makes these useful tools for those who already have an interest in a specific topic. However, it seems that the biggest challenge is how to spark this interest in the first place, a task in which schools, governments, the media — and scientists themselves — have both a shared responsibility and shared interests.



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