

# Just One Word – "Genetics"



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People of a certain age will remember that scene from the movie *The Graduate*, where a businessman friend of the family took Dustin Hoffman aside and said, "I just want to say one word to you – just one word – 'plastics'" (was that really 35 years ago?). As it turns out, in 1967 that was pretty good advice. Getting ahead of the curve is essential in order to be successful in this world. And spotting the next big trend gives us a head start.

As I approach the end of my tenure as COACH President, I want to take this opportunity to give my own advice to all of you young health informatics professionals, those who weren't born when Dustin Hoffman heard those immortal words. My advice? Just one word – 'genetics'.

Anyone who thinks they've witnessed a revolution in health informatics should step back and realize that they are on the flat end of a curve that is about to spike. The mapping of the human genome, advances in cloning and all other forms of genetic research are going to turn our notions of health information management upside down. Over the coming decades we will witness extraordinary opportunities and advances in healthcare: designer drugs, made to measure transplant organs, almost god-like control over our reproductive processes, and other yet-to-be-imagined possibilities.

And it's all based on information. DNA is nothing but coded information cleverly wrapped up by the Creator in a bundle of proteins. A little map stored in every cell in our bodies. Knowledge is power, and whoever controls this knowledge will have tremendous power indeed. And believe me, everyone will want in on this power struggle: governments, corporations, law enforcement authorities, and the medical establishment to mention a few.

Those who manage, manipulate and store this information will be at the centre of a maelstrom that

will challenge humanity in ways never before experienced. And guess what? That's us. Our personal genetic codes will be deciphered by medical labs and stored in our electronic health records. We will be designated as custodians of this information. The ethical dilemmas arising out of the genetic revolution will be ours to mediate and arbitrate.

And boy, will there be ethical dilemmas! What could be more private than the very code that defines what you are? And it's a code that everyone wants to get their hands on. For example, the insurance company that wants to know if I'm susceptible to cancer or the law enforcement agency that wants to know if I have a propensity to violence. And who owns my code? Will we be fighting with drug companies for intellectual property rights to our DNA in the courts? Will there be a black market in celebrity hairbrushes for those who want to harvest DNA samples to grow their own personal Britney Spears or Matt Damons?

It's a little scary, but most advances are. Because outweighing the negative effects are opportunities to improve the quality of life for all people. The eradication of many diseases, the repair of debilitating disabilities, and the ability to identify the perpetrators of crimes are all benefits that will drive the advancement of genetic science.

So that's my advice to the new generation of health informatics professionals. Get into genetics and understand what it means for you, your profession and humanity. And for those of us who are more long-in-the-tooth, hang onto your hats because it's a ride we'll all be on.



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