

Geneticists: DNA can link Americans to Africa kin

WASHINGTON (AP) — A team of geneticists at Howard University plans to offer a DNA test this summer that could link black Americans with their roots in Africa.

Geneticist Rick Kittles said today that he is still preparing the database for the comparisons, but expected the program to get under way in a few months.

There has been wide interest in this means of

tracing people back to their homelands, he said, commenting that he has done DNA tests on "several hundred" people in preparing for the program.

Historical records are pretty consistent in showing the early slaves came from west central Africa, he said, locations of the current countries of Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Angola.

In Boston, Richard Newman of Harvard

University's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African-American Research, said: "It doesn't mean anything to know that some of my people came from Africa, but if I can pinpoint a culture, a religion and language, then it can strengthen my sense of identity and relationship with Africa."

The Howard University group would use a blood test that matches DNA sequences to samples taken from native African populations. The test could cost up to \$300.

Kittles, the 34-year-old

geneticist at Howard who initiated the study, said the slave trade erased family histories, and, before the discovery of DNA, nobody imagined that the stories could be rewritten.

"To a lot of blacks, knowing a little bit of the story is important," Kittles told The Boston Globe.

"This will definitely contribute a lot to understanding the history of African-Americans."

Kittles said Howard University will be able to do two versions of the DNA test.

The first looks at mitochondrial DNA, which is handed down, unchanged, from mother to child. The other uses the male, or Y chromosome, which is passed on from father to son.

Researchers then can compare test subjects with a database of more than 2,000 samples assembled from about 40 populations across western Africa, where the trans-Atlantic slave trade originated.

Kittles said his team is collecting additional DNA samples so they can expand

the database and identify more African populations.

The researchers also have collected a separate database with American Indian, Asian and European DNA to cross-reference genes that cannot be traced to Africa.

The geneticists said DNA tests in the study so far show that about 30 percent of the black men tested descended from Europeans on the fathers' side.

The researchers said that was largely the legacy of enslaved women who were raped.

Treatments differ for black and white glaucoma patients

Special to Sentinel-Voice

According to the National Institutes of Health, recent research has provided evidence that black and white patients with advanced glaucoma respond differently to two surgical treatments.

Their studies show blacks do better on a regimen that starts with laser surgery, while whites benefit from an operation called trabeculectomy. Researchers into the devastating disease- which can cause irreversible vision loss- say it develops earlier and more often, and progresses more rapidly in blacks than in whites.

Glaucoma is actually a group of diseases that can lead to damage of the eye's optic nerve and resultant loss of vision. In many cases, it occurs when the normal fluid pressure in the eye increases. If undetected and untreated, glaucoma can result in blindness.

"We're finding that glaucoma may be a different disease in people of African descent, requiring more aggressive therapies," said Dr. Kevin C. Greenidge, Ophthalmology Department chairman at State University of New York's Health Science Center in Brooklyn and a board member of The Glaucoma Foundation.

"Our main aim is to lower the pressure buildup within the eye to slow progression of the disease and save sight," he said. "Fortunately, studies suggest that a significant number of patients with advanced glaucoma can be stabilized if treatment is appropriately aggressive."

When treating black patients with advanced disease, Greenidge often uses a two-step approach- laser, then conventional surgery- in his own practice as well as in training student physicians at SUNY. In addition, glaucoma specialists may also use anti-metabolic medication at the time of surgery to prevent formation of scar tissue, which is more prevalent in patients of African descent.

Saying, "the best weapon we have against glaucoma is public awareness," Greenidge urges everyone to get regular comprehensive eye exams for early detection of this "sneak thief of sight." He recommends that it be done every two years.

The doctor lists several things that can predispose a person to the disease, including family history of glaucoma, nearsightedness, diabetes, a previous eye injury or regular use of cortisone/steroid products. "If you are over 45 and of African descent," he said, "or if you have any of these risk factors, get your eyes tested every year."

For free information about glaucoma, including personal answers to questions, call The Glaucoma Foundation, toll-free, at 1-800-452-8266 (1-800-GLAUCOMA), or visit the website at www.glaucoma-foundation.org.



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