



Genetic Screening

Sometimes the future is closer than you think. It is a comfort to know that some politicians are aware of that fact.

Since the human dawn, the personal destinies of individual humans have been clouded in a mist of uncertainty. Now biotechnology is evaporating that mist.

The human genome project and other research will, in the not too distant future, yield enough information to enable a map of any individual's probable destiny to be produced. It will be possible for people in lab coats to tell you what behaviours you are predisposed to, what illnesses you have a likelihood of contracting, and in some circumstances, what you are likely to die of. This is not science fiction but the emerging reality of the early 21st Century.

It will require action from legislators across a variety of portfolio areas. For example, now if you know you have a preexisting condition, you are not allowed to insure against it..... Life and health insurance companies operate on the basis of shouldering a risk, in return for progressive payments. The basis of that industry is being undermined by advances in genetic screening because the risk is being transformed into a very much more predictable outcome. Those who know they have a genetic risk will be doubly keen to insure, and those who know they don't will have no motive to do so. Insurance companies on the other hand will have a motive not to insure those who know they have a genetic risk, and to insure only those who know they don't. The market, left to its own dynamic, will deliver insurance only to those who don't need it, and refuse it to those who do.

This practical antinomy of the near future is simply the logical consequence of allowing this area of our civic life to be governed by self-interest. Market place philosophies work worse in some circumstances than in others. The fundamental basis of the insurance industry, risk reduction, is about to be excised from under it. Their product will largely cease to exist as the forward march of science eliminates the risk. Our thinking, and our policies, need to cater for this. What we are going

to need in the future is a national health insurance plan that is equal to the occasion. It will be necessary for society to take control of the information, and put in an appropriate prevention programme, and look after those people who, in the future, are not going to be able to get insurance for the conditions that some of them will inevitably suffer.

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