Equitable Expanded Carrier Screening Needs Indigenous Clinical and Population Genomic Data

Simon Easteal,[1,*] Ruth M. Arkell,[2] Renzo F. Balboa,[1] Shayne A. Bellingham,[1] Alex D. Brown,[3,4] Tom Calma,[5] Matthew C. Cook,[6] Megan Davis,[7] Hugh J.S. Dawkins,[8,9,10,11,12] Marcel E. Dinger,[13] Michael S. Dobbie,[1,2] Ashley Farlow,[1,14] Kylie G. Gwynne,[5,15] Azure Hermes,[1] Wendy E. Hoy,[16] Misty R. Jenkins,[17,18] Simon H. Jiang,[6] Warren Kaplan,[19] Stephen Leslie,[1,14] Bastien Llamas,[1,20] Graham J. Mann,[2] Brendan J. McMorran,[2] Rebekah E. McWhirter,[21] Cliff J. Meldrum,[22] Shivashankar H. Nagaraj,[23] Saul J. Newman,[24] Jack S. Nunn,[25] Lyndon Ormond-Parker,[26] Neil J. Orr,[5] Devashi Paliwal,[1,2] Hardip R. Patel,[1] Glenn Pearson,[27] Greg R. Pratt,[28] Boe Rambaldini,[5] Lynette W. Russell,[29] Ravi Savarirayan,[30] Matthew Silcocks,[1,14] John C. Skinner,[5] Yassine Souilmi,[1,31] Carola G. Vinuesa,[2] The National Centre for Indigenous Genomics, and[1] Gareth Baynam[32,33,34,*]

Expanded carrier screening (ECS) for recessive monogenic diseases requires prior knowledge of genomic variation, including DNA variants that cause disease. The composition of pathogenic variants differs greatly among human populations, but historically, research about monogenic diseases has focused mainly on people with European ancestry. By comparison, less is known about pathogenic DNA variants in people from other parts of the world. Consequently, inclusion of currently underrepresented Indigenous and other minority population groups in genomic research is essential to enable equitable outcomes in ECS and other areas of genomic medicine. Here, we discuss this issue in relation to the implementation of ECS in Australia, which is currently being evaluated as part of the national Government's Genomics Health Futures Mission. We argue that significant effort is required to build an evidence base and genomic reference data so that ECS can bring significant clinical benefit for many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians. These efforts are essential steps to achieving the Australian Government's objectives and its commitment "to leveraging the benefits of genomics in the health system for all Australians." They require culturally safe, community-led research and community involvement embedded within national health and medical genomics programs to ensure that new knowledge is integrated into medicine and health services in ways that address the specific and articulated cultural and health needs of Indigenous people. Until this occurs, people who do not have European ancestry are at risk of being, in relative terms, further disadvantaged.

Introduction

Genomic technologies have enabled major advances in understanding and treating rare monogenic diseases. Greater accessibility to genomic data and greater knowledge to interpret it have improved diagnostic rates for existing conditions, greatly expanded the number of diseases for which diagnostic tests are available, led to greater understanding of biological processes underlying pathology, enabled development of better and targeted therapies, and resulted in improved prenatal and preimplantation testing.[1–4] Genomic technologies have also created the possibility of pre-conception expanded carrier screening

[1]National Centre for Indigenous Genomics, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia; [2]John Curtin School of Medical Research, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia; [3]Aboriginal Health Equity, South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute, Adelaide, SA 5000, Australia; [4]Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia; [5]Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia; [6]Department of Immunology, Canberra Hospital, Canberra, ACT 2606, Australia; [7]UNSW Law, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia; [8]HBF Health Limited, Perth, WA 6000, Australia; [9]School of Medicine, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney, NSW 2010, Australia; [10]Sir Walter Murdoch School of Policy and International Affairs, Murdoch University, Murdoch, WA 6150, Australia; [11]Division of Genetics, School of Biomedical Sciences, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA 6008, Australia; [12]Centre for Population Health Research, Curtin University of Technology, Bentley, WA 6102, Australia; [13]School of Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia; [14]Melbourne Integrative Genomics, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia; [15]Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2113, Australia; [16]Faculty of Medicine, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia; [17]Immunology Division, The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Parkville, VIC 3052, Australia; [18]La Trobe Institute of Molecular Science, La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC 3086, Australia; [19]Informatics, Garvan Institute of Medical Research, Sydney, NSW 2010, Australia; [20]Centre of Excellence in Australian Biodiversity and Heritage, School of Biological Sciences, The Environment Institute, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia; [21]Centre for Law and Genetics, Faculty of Law, University of Tasmania, Hobart, TAS 7001, Australia; [22]NSW Health Pathology, Sydney, NSW 2065, Australia; [23]Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD 4000, Australia; [24]Biological Data Science Institute, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia; [25]Public Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC 3086, Australia; [26]Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia; [27]Aboriginal Health, Telethon Kids Institute, Perth, WA 6009, Australia; [28]Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Brisbane, QLD 4006, Australia; [29]Centre of Excellence in Australian Biodiversity and Heritage, Monash Indigenous Studies Centre, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC 3800, Australia; [30]Victorian Clinical Genetic Services, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, and University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3052, Australia; [31]School of Biological Sciences, The Environment Institute, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia; [32]Genetic Services of Western Australia, Department of Health, Government of Western Australia, Perth, WA 6004, Australia; [33]The Western Australian Register of Developmental Anomalies, Department of Health, Government of Western Australia, Perth, WA 6004, Australia; [34]School of Medicine, Division of Paediatrics and Telethon Kids Institute, University of Western Australia, Perth, WA 6009, Australia

*Correspondence: simon.easteal@anu.edu.au (S.E.), gareth.baynam@health.wa.gov.au (G.B.)

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajhg.2020.06.005.

(ECS) by which prospective parents are simultaneously screened as potential carriers of a range of different recessive diseases.[5–7]

Pre-reproductive carrier screening is generally targeted at specific genes and carried out where there is an increased risk of a child's being born with a specific recessive condition because of ancestry or based on clinical information.[8] It has been extremely effective, e.g., in reducing the incidence of Tay-Sachs disease (MIM: 272800) in Ashkenazi Jewish populations around the world.[9,10] ECS is an extension of this approach that involves simultaneous screening for many pathogenic variants responsible for a broad range of diseases in the general population. This broad-scale approach to screening is achieved by sequencing the entire genomes (genome sequencing) or the fraction of the genome that encodes proteins—the exome (exome sequencing)—of prospective parents. Although data are obtained for the whole genome or exome, screening is often targeted at a predetermined subset of genes and/or variants.[11,12]

The Australian Government is evaluating the potential benefits and challenges that ECS presents[7,12–17] with a view to its introduction into the national healthcare system.[18] Our focus here is on the significant challenges of achieving inclusion and equitable benefits for Indigenous Australians from this approach and, by extension, medical genomics generally. Although our focus is on Indigenous Australians, many of the points we raise apply to other groups that are underrepresented in current genomic reference data.

Ethical, cultural, social, and policy considerations are of overriding importance in genomics. Implementation of ECS in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities raises questions about the cultural appropriateness of screening in different communities; how prospective parents should be counselled and appropriately informed about ESC; the means by which consent should be obtained; the potential impact on social and cultural norms; the potential for group, family, and/or individual stigmatization; how screening can be harmonized with cultural practices, lifestyles, and traditional concepts; whether the autonomy of patients, families, and communities can be preserved; the proportion of the population likely to benefit from this approach; how screening will be administered through community controlled and other local health services; and whether there is the capacity for culturally safe counselling and follow-up clinical care.

Fully articulating these complex issues for health professionals and Indigenous communities is a substantial undertaking that needs adequate resourcing to ensure appropriate support. We address only the salient points here. Our main focus is on scientific evidence about genetics and its medical implications for Indigenous Australians as a foundation to better inform this process.

The core challenge for ECS implementation is the lack of knowledge about genomic variants in Indigenous populations and the lack of appropriate clinical and genomic reference data. Carrier screening depends on prior knowledge of pathogenic variants, most of which comes from studies of people of European ancestry, which may have limited or suboptimal applicability to other populations.[19–27]

Because Australia is a culturally and ancestrally diverse nation, there is a need to recognize how genomic information is interpreted, incorporated, and translated meaningfully in the lives, experiences, and healthcare of individuals from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In particular, there is a national imperative to ensure equitable benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who collectively experience significant disparity in morbidity and mortality[28] and access to health services[28,29] compared with non-Indigenous Australians.

We discuss how the involvement of Indigenous people must be fully embedded within national health genomics initiatives, such as ECS, to ensure that the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are met and that these initiatives deliver outcomes consistent with the equity principles that underpin Australia's public healthcare system: universal coverage and universal access.

Medical Genomics in Australia

The national introduction of ECS is being evaluated as part of the Genomics Health Futures Mission (GHFM), a program funded by the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF). Projects funded through the GHFM operate within the policy settings provided by Australia's National Health Genomics Policy Framework (NHGPF) developed by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (AHMAC) and agreed upon by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Health Ministers in November 2017 (Box 1). The NHGPF recognizes the importance of addressing the requirements for Indigenous inclusion in the implementation of genomic medicine (Box 1).

Pathogenic Variants Are Generally Rare and Population Specific

Most monogenic diseases are caused by many different DNA variants in one or more specific genes,[7] almost all of which are rare. These variants might occur only in people with ancestry from a particular geographic region, in one small community, or even in a single family. Thus, for example, more than 2,000 different known pathogenic variants in *CFTR* (MIM: 602421) can cause the recessive monogenic disease cystic fibrosis (CF; MIM: 219700). Approximately 1 in 3,000 people are affected by CF in northern Europe.[30] Elsewhere, however, it is much rarer and is usually caused by local, rare variants that are not found in European patients.[31] Thus, for example, in China and in the many substantial Chinese communities elsewhere in the world where CF, although rare, affects an estimated 20,000 people, carrier screening panels designed for

Box 1. The National Health Genomics Policy Framework (NHGPF), Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF), and Genomic Health Futures Mission (GHRM)

The National Health Genomics Policy Framework (NHGPF) provides the blueprint for embedding genomics in the Australian health system. It "presents a shared commitment to leveraging the benefits of genomics in the health system for all Australians."

The principles underpinning NHGPF's priorities are as follows:

- The application of genomic knowledge is ethically, legally, and socially responsible, and community trust is promoted
- Access and equity are promoted for vulnerable populations
- The application of genomic knowledge to health care is supported and informed by evidence and research.

Recognizing the importance of equity and inclusion, particularly in relation to Indigenous Australians, the priority areas of action of the NHGPF 2018–2021 include the following:

- 1.5. exploring the potential for discrimination and evaluating the delivery of genomic services in terms of their being accessible, appropriate, and culturally secure and responsive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- 5.2. promoting culturally safe and appropriate genomic and phenotypic data collection and sharing that reflects the ethnic diversity within the Australian population, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The intended outcomes of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) are as follows:

1. life changing discoveries such as new treatments, drugs, and devices
2. continuous improvement and innovation in the health system that benefits all Australians
3. strengthening domestic research capacity through support, collaboration, and the development of expert talent
4. positioning Australia's health and medical research sector at the forefront of the innovation economy
5. improving Australia's reputation as a global leader in health and medical research.

The objective of the Genomics Health Futures Mission (GHFM) is as follows:

1. deliver better diagnostics and targeted treatments
2. avoid unnecessary health costs
3. improve patient experience and outcomes.

The fund supports research projects that aim to do the following:

1. provide the pathways for the development of new diagnostics, medicines, and treatments from genomics research
2. expand genomics research effort and reach, allowing researchers and commercial partners to sustain efforts in discovery
3. build evidence for scaling applications, and build new markets
4. ensure that later stage translation and flagship work is not hampered by a lack of investment in early research.

ancestrally European populations fail to detect most CF carriers.[32]

The rarity and geographically restricted origins of pathogenic variants have important consequences for Australia's diverse society.

1. The makeup of pathogenic variants is likely to be unique, reflecting the unique diversity of Indigenous peoples and the ancestral makeup of settlers and immigrants.
2. For the same reasons, it is likely that there are many pathogenic variants that have not been previously characterized. These novel variants may cause already described clinical phenotypes. It is likely, however, that even if they have similar molecular properties to known variants, some will cause different phenotypes. These include milder or more serious forms of disease and different treatment responses.[33] Clinical and functional investigation will generally be required to establish their pathogenicity

and associated disease phenotypes.[34]

3. For recessive diseases, many novel combinations of pathogenic variants are likely. A recessive disease can be caused by $(n(n-1)/2)+n$ combinations of n pathogenic variants. Only a small fraction of these combinations can occur where the geographic distribution of variants is restricted. However, in a society with many people of mixed ancestry, many novel combinations of variants are likely. These novel combinations may cause novel disease phenotypes and have differing effects on treatment responses.
4. Genomic background, environment, and lifestyle are more likely to influence the phenotypic manifestation of recessive diseases caused by pathogenic variants, even potentially causing normally pathogenic variants to become benign[35] or normally benign variants to become pathogenic[36,37] because of the following:

I. The environment and lifestyle of many people has rapidly changed as a result of alterations in economic or social circumstances, changes in diet, or displacement or migration.
II. There are many people of mixed ancestry in whom the effect of a variant on disease might have changed after it arrived in a genomic background different to the one in which it had previously existed.

Pathogenic Variants in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

Global prevalence estimates[7,38] suggest that, to a first approximation, more than 30,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people might be affected by monogenic diseases and that many more might be carriers of pathogenic variants. Many of these variants will be different from those causing the same diseases in people with ancestry from Europe and other parts of the world. Many might cause either formerly unknown diseases or phenotypic manifestations of known diseases that have not previously been encountered in a clinical setting.

Some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have pathogenic variants inherited from non-Indigenous ancestors. However, with few exceptions, like Machado-Joseph disease[39] and a complex phenotype resulting from an *MTOR* variant,[40] little is known about pathogenic variants originating within Indigenous populations.

Unpublished data compiled by the National Centre for Indigenous Genomics (NCIG) for 160 people from four Aboriginal communities show the following:

1. Approximately 25% of all DNA variants in the genome of an Aboriginal person, disregarding variants inherited from non-Aboriginal ancestors, are unknown in people from outside of Australia. Among the large number of Aboriginal- and Torres-Strait-Islander-specific variants, there will be some that are pathogenic. These will not be represented in international or Australian clinical databases or in current screening panels. These databases and panels might, therefore, currently be of limited value for screening in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
2. Of these Aboriginal-specific variants, ~40% are likely to be found in a single region or community. Overall, based on F_{ST} distances[41] and comparison with data from the Simons Genome Diversity Project,[42] genomic differences among Aboriginal communities across Australia are as great as those between populations across Europe and Asia combined. Thus, for example, using information about people from the Northern Territory as a basis for treating people in South Western Australia would be equivalent to treating people with British ancestry on the basis of information about people from Cambodia.

These data can be accessed and used for specific purposes, as determined by the NCIG Indigenous-majority Board, in accordance with the CARE data sovereignty principles[43] and the National Centre for Indigenous Genomics Statute, 2016 (Cth).[44]

The current lack of evidence means that for many people with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ancestry, ECS will produce greater uncertainty, revealing more "likely pathogenic variants" (LPVs) and "variants of unknown significance" (VUSs) than for those with ancestry from Europe and other parts of the world where the causes of monogenic diseases are better understood. This uncertainty could potentially lead to inappropriate clinical intervention if benign variants are incorrectly reported as pathogenic, as has occurred elsewhere.[45–47]

The risk of variants' being falsely reported as pathogenic can be avoided by increasing the threshold of evidence required to assign pathogenicity. This approach, which reduces the risk of false positive reports, also tends to cause underreporting of pathogenic variants because some do not meet the higher threshold of evidence. The same evidence-based criteria will have a differential effect when applied to populations for which there are different levels of available evidence. Pathogenic variants will tend to be underreported to a greater extent in populations where there is a relative lack of evidence, as there is for people with Indigenous ancestry.

The result is greater "residual risk," i.e., more couples with a risk of having an affected child that is not identified by ECS. High residual risk is equivalent to low sensitivity, i.e., high rates of false negative findings. Thus, when residual risk is high, negative findings have little predictive value. For the great majority of prospective

parents who test negative, testing provides little information. Thus, participation in testing might raise awareness of potential risk but leave most participants uncertain about their own risk.

In addition, increasing the threshold of evidence for pathogenicity reduces the "yield," i.e., the number of couples identified as being at risk. The result is that, overall, fewer people benefit from screening.[48] If the expected yield for the general population is 1%–2%, the lower expected yield for couples with Indigenous ancestry means that many hundreds of couples might be screened without any of them receiving a report that they are at risk of giving birth to a child with a monogenic disease.

The lack of knowledge about variant pathogenicity adds to the challenges of counselling prospective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and of supplying the accurate information they need in order to make informed decisions about undergoing ECS.

Novel variants identified through ECS can be functionally and clinically investigated. These investigations are, however, unlikely to provide useful information to prospective parents because of the amount of time required to carry them out. They might, nevertheless, give rise to new evidence that improves the quality of screening for future patients.

These indirect benefits might provide ethical justification for ECS as a medical intervention if it were not possible to obtain them in other ways, even when there is little potential benefit and considerable risk for patients. Novel pathogenic variants can, however, be more effectively identified and their phenotypic effects better characterized at greatly reduced risk through direct clinical investigation of affected patients and their families. This more direct approach is greatly enhanced by characterization of genomic variation in patient communities, which can be critically important for variant discovery[40,47,49] and correct assignment of pathogenicity.[45–47]

How to Address the Current Disparity?

The validity of ECS depends on population reference data and a preexisting evidence base, which has been painstakingly built up through decades of careful direct clinical investigation of affected patients and relevant family members[34,50,51] (mainly in people of European ancestry), linking specific DNA variants with disease phenotypes. Equitable inclusion of Indigenous Australians in the benefits of ECS, and medical genomics more generally, requires a similar level of evidence.

The critical importance of ancestry in the many other areas of healthcare where genomics now plays an important role[19–26] has led to programs aimed at achieving diversity in genomics, e.g., in India,[52] Asia,[53] Africa,[54] Aotearoa-New Zealand,[55] and the US.[56]

An equitable approach in Australia would require prioritization of research involving people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent, as well as other underrepresented groups, as an integral part of national medical genomics programs. National programs should include (1) detailed characterization of genomic variation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and (2) careful study, with community involvement and leadership, of pathogenicity and the general clinical, cultural, and social consequences of diseases.

Programs must be designed and sufficiently resourced to include Indigenous community leadership to ensure appropriate research conduct at a time when community acceptance of genomics is critically important.[57] As in other areas of healthcare,[39,58,59] extending approaches developed for the general population or retrofitting systems that were not designed to meet the specific needs of Indigenous people will not be effective and might do more harm than good. Hence, there is a need, at all levels and stages, for Indigenous co-design and development and incorporation of Indigenous data governance and custodianship as the foundations of national medical genomics programs.

Finally, it is essential to account for the significant genomic differences as well as the significant socio-cultural differences among the many Indigenous communities across the Australian continent.

Conclusion

ECS is one of many medical applications of genomics that, collectively, can transform the healthcare system for the better. For these developments to contribute usefully to the health and wellbeing of Australians with Indigenous ancestry, the current dearth of evidence and lack of reference data must be addressed. To ensure their culturally safe conduct, national genomic medicine programs must ensure that Indigenous communities are empowered by incorporating Indigenous leadership, co-conceptualization, and co-design and implementing the principles of Indigenous sovereignty over genomic data.

Australia has an opportunity to embrace the challenges presented by the cultural and ancestral diversity of its people to deliver research and clinical outcomes with significant global impact. New discoveries leading to therapeutic innovation are more likely from clinical investigation of people whose health and disease have previously been neglected and of illnesses, which, until now, have been ignored, than from focusing on better understood problems in well-studied populations.

In addition, addressing the specific requirements of Australians with Indigenous ancestry and other underrepresented groups would directly support the Australian Government's commitment to equity and inclusion. It would redress past inequities and provide a model for better healthcare practice in Australia and internationally.

Australia has a unique opportunity for medical genomics innovation leading to improved prediction, prevention, treatment, and cure of disease based on the distinctive characteristics of genomic diversity and its relationship to disease in Indigenous people, reflecting the continuing ancient presence of Indigenous people on the

Australian continent.[60] In realizing this comparative advantage, the central role and importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be recognized, they must be at the forefront of national programs, and they must stand to gain an equitable share of the resulting benefits.

Acknowledgments

Sandra Cooper, Patricia Easteal, Paul Lacaze, Daniel MacArthur, Carol Wicking, Jackie Stenhouse, and Phillip Wilcox provided valuable comments and feedback. The National Centre for Indigenous Genomics' genome sequencing program is supported by grants from the Australian Genomics Health Alliance, the Australian Research Data Commons (ARDC), Bioplatforms Australia (BPA), the Canberra Medical Society, the National Computational Infrastructure (NCI) through their ANU and National Merit Allocation Schemes, and the National Health and Medical Research Council (GNT1143734). NCI, ARDC, and BPA are supported by the Australian Government through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) program.

Declaration of Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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