

Area firm plans to market genetic tests for illnesses By examining your genetic code, doctors could see looming problems, and treat them early

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When it comes to health, our destiny is in our genes.

The human genome map drawn in 2003 created the possibility of “personalized medicine.” By examining your genetic code, doctors could spot looming problems — and treat them early.

A Buffalo company that sprouted from Roswell Park Cancer Institute has announced plans to make good on the vision of personalized medicine.

Empire Genomics, founded by genome project researcher Norma Nowak, plans to market genetic tests for over 200 maladies — and create 60 jobs over five years in the process.

“We’re going to take scientific discoveries . . . and translate them into products that help people,” said Candace Johnson, chairwoman of the pharmacology and therapeutics department at Roswell Park, during a press conference Thursday in Buffalo’s medical corridor.

Empire Genomics is based in Buffalo’s Life Sciences Complex, the trio of buildings that joins the cancer institute with researchers at the University at Buffalo and Hauptman- Woodward Medical Research Institute.

The launch of the spinoff company helps fulfill the promise of economic benefits that were predicted to flow back to the community as a result of the multimillion-dollar public investment in the research complex, supporters said.

“The future is no longer a concept,” said Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, who attended the announcement. “The future is now.”

Empire Genomics has seven workers currently, President Anthony Johnson said. Local investors have contributed an undisclosed amount of more than \$1 million, enough to fund start-up operations for the next 12 to 18 months, he said.

The company’s business plan anticipates sales of \$2 million in the next 12 months, growing to \$50 million after five years.

Vijay Kumar, president of a 60- person testing company called Immco Diagnostics in Amherst, agreed that the potential for commercial DNA testing is strong. His company tests for enzymes to identify auto-immune disorders.

The pioneering role in genomic research played by Nowak and Roswell Park gives the company a strong position in the fledgling market, he said. In addition to contributing to the Human Genome Project, Nowak is a prominent cancer geneticist with appointments at both Roswell Park and the University at Buffalo School of Medicine.



Empire Genomics is seeking state regulators' approval to sell diagnostic devices for patients, which it expects to win early next year. For now, the technology can be sold to scientists as a research tool.

Genetic testing "is a billion dollar marketplace, with very few products out there," Johnson said.

The tests will cost about \$2,000 each. However, insurers are willing to pay, he said, in order to spot problems early and avoid more costly treatment down the road.

Empire Genomics' tests aim to spot hard-to-diagnose forms of Down Syndrome and markers for autism, among other prenatal tests.

For cancer patients, its tests can point the way to the most effective treatment for a particular type of tumor.

"You may not be able to cure [an illness] but you can manage treatment much better," Nowak said. Drugs that work for some cancer patients do more harm than good for others, because of genetic differences.

The technological basis of the tests is called a "microarray." Using a blood sample or cheek swab, a patient's genetic makeup can be compared to the human norm on a slide covered by a tiny grid. A chemical reaction highlights departures from the norm in a high-volume system that pinpoints the problem gene.

Currently using labs at Roswell Park and offices at the University at Buffalo Center of Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences, Empire Genomics expects to move into its own facility somewhere in Buffalo within a year.

The launch extends a string of high-profile biotech start-ups in the medical corridor this year. Cleveland Biolabs, developer of a potential radiation antidote, was recruited along with its founding researcher in January. The same month, Roswell Park spinoff PersonaDX announced plans to develop in Buffalo its genetic test for the early identification of fast spreading cancers.

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