



Our Genes / Our Choices

Making Better Babies



Francis Collins, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, describes how advances in genetic technologies not only provide enormous benefits, but also lead to tough decisions for all of us.

JOHN HOCKENBERRY:

Certainly, the science has allowed people to have options that they wouldn't have otherwise had. What's the down side?

FRANCIS COLLINS:

Well, we say that knowledge is power, but knowledge also carries with it tough decisions and responsibilities for making those decisions, which I think frankly many people find quite discomforting and understandably so. Right now one can test for a small number of things. In the future, that list will grow. And so the challenge to educate people who are contemplating the test will also grow. And the difficulty in making the decisions will also grow. And if we're having trouble now, hold onto your hat. It's going to be much more challenging for couples like this.

Let me hasten to say that what we're considering here is a small part of the consequences of understanding genetics. We're considering probably the most wrenchingly difficult part, the part that plays out in the pre-natal decision-making arena.

But the real pay-off of genetics is not there, I'm sorry. It's not there. The pay-off is in understanding diseases and so if faced with the possibility of having a child with cystic fibrosis, in ten or 20 years, it will not be a big deal, because we'll know what to do for it. That's where we're headed.