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## Genetic experts slam DNA ancestry testing

Leigh Dayton, Science writer | January 31, 2008

### **A LEADING molecular geneticist has slammed direct-to-customer DNA ancestry testing as misleading and inaccurate.**

The criticism follows the launch last week of Australia's first such service by the Victorian-based DNA Solutions, despite a lack of national regulatory standards for so-called "do it yourself" genetic tests.

The firm claims it can provide "exact ancestral origins" going back 150,000 years by testing a DNA sample for a \$295 fee.

"It's a complete waste of money," said Simon Easteal, an expert in human evolution with the Australian National University in Canberra.

According to Professor Easteal, the genetic data obtained by firms like DNA Solutions is helping scientists track how human variation emerged in large populations of people over time. "But it tells you almost nothing about your individual ancestry," he said.

Vern Muir, DNA Solutions director, disagreed: "It's a starting point for people."

The firm's laboratory development manager, Pamela Jarman, claimed "thousands" of scientists worldwide are using the biotechnology to track the ancestry of individual people.

The chairman of Australia's Human Genetics Advisory Committee, molecular geneticist Ron Trent, disputed the claim: "The DNA tests claiming to do this are at the level of research."

Professors Easteal's and Trent's concerns echoed those raised in the US and Britain in the wake of DIY web-based services such as 23andMe, Navigenics, Knome and DeCode Genetics.

Writing this month in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, three influential US scientists claimed the tests were "premature attempts at popularising genetic testing". One of the authors - Muin Khoury, head of the National Office of Public Health Genomics at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - called the tests "recreational genomics".

**Last December, the American Society of Human Genetics claimed DIY firms were offering many of the 1100 genetic tests previously available only by healthcare providers, among them ancestry tests.**

The Australian Law Reform Commission foreshadowed the advent of DIY testing and called for its regulation in a 2003 report.

"Now that these tests are coming on to the market, they will inevitably proliferate and get cheaper over time," said ALRC president David Weisbrot. "It's clear we really need that regulatory framework now."

To that end, Professor Trent yesterday met in Canberra with National Health and Medical Research Committee officials. "We have to identify the scope of the potential problem; who is doing what."

Professor Trent said that based on the ALRC report, the HGAC had concluded issues requiring urgent attention included the accreditation of DIY testing laboratories, assessment of the validity of the tests, public education and support for people seeking sensitive personal or health information.

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