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bioephemera is art + biology - anything and everything from representations of science in art and literature to the neuroscience of aesthetics. Along with lots of other stuff that's just plain interesting.

Jessica Palmer is a biologist & artist currently based in Washington, DC. She spent the last few years teaching at a small state college out West, and now plays with science policy. Her [homepage](#) includes the bioephemera archives & a gallery of her work.

Note: the contents of this blog are the personal opinions of the author, completely independent of any organizations with which she is affiliated.

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The Senate Likes DNA Too!

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 Posted on: April 25, 2008 4:13 PM, by [Jessica Palmer](#)



Mr. Tompkins Learns the Facts of Life, 1953

Via [eliz.avery's flickr stream](#)

Happy [DNA Day](#)!

It's been slow here on the blog lately, for a number of reasons - the most salient of which is that I've been on the Hill all week at the [Congressional Operations Seminar](#) sponsored by the Government Affairs Institute at Georgetown. I highly recommend this course - it was a lot of fun. But unfortunately I didn't have a functional laptop this week, and thus couldn't blog. (At one point, my poor Mac burped up a [blue screen of death](#) - I didn't even know such a thing was possible!)

Yesterday, I *just* missed seeing the Senate's [long-awaited unanimous passage of GINA](#), the [Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act](#). I was in the Senate

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observation gallery about an hour after the vote.

For those of you who haven't observed the government in action (not that the Senate floor is usually the most exciting place), here's [how it works](#): you first pick up Gallery passes in your Senator's office. Then you head over to the Capitol and navigate a bizarre gauntlet of queues, hallways, stairs and security checkpoints. Be prepared to check all of your belongings in at the desk - no cell phones or ipods allowed in the gallery - and be prepared to wait. It's not trivial to get in there during the opening days of tourist season (we've had beautiful weather, so the tourists are thicker than bumblebees.) I'm told the "locals" go in the evening after the tour buses have left - but GINA was up at 2pm, so I tried. Oh well. Next time, I'll go for C-SPAN.

I have no idea if the Senate was motivated by DNA Day - probably not - but GINA now goes back to the House, which passed it a year ago today, with a few minor changes. Once the House passes a version identical to the Senate's, the president has indicated he'll sign it. What this basically means is that insurers and employers are prohibited from discriminating against employees on the basis of genetic test results. It does not protect people who have been diagnosed with *symptoms* of diseases of genetic origin, but if you have not yet shown signs of a disease, you will not be penalized for having a genetic predisposition toward it - your DNA will not be considered a "pre-existing condition".

I didn't encounter anyone this week who was familiar with GINA - nor, for that matter, with genetics. I think people's brains kept shutting off when I brought it up.

But fortunately kids are increasingly comfortable with genetic concepts, to a degree that might surprise adults. The American Society of Human Genetics' 2008 DNA Day Essay Contest yielded some literate and optimistic winners, like this one by high school student Razan Dababo:

Mapping the human genome was definitely not the concluding step in understanding human genetics. Genes are far from being unchanging, mechanical units: in fact, they are very interactive. Their interactions with each other and their surrounding environment affect their expression. Chemical modifications are capable of interfering with protein synthesis, either by turning genes off directly or rendering chromatin difficult to loosen. Chemical interactions such as these comprise epigenetics. Understanding epigenetic processes is crucial for unlocking hidden therapies. It holds enormous potential, both scientific and therapeutic. (Razan Dababo, Mercy High School, Burlingame, CA)

I doubt most senators know what epigenetics is. . . go Razan!

I'll be back on the blog shortly with edition 6 of the Cabinet of Curiosities blog carnival, so stay tuned, and enjoy the sunshine.

PS: update (5/1): the House has passed GINA as well. The president has indicated he'll sign it.

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