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Mexico Launches Genetic Mapping Project

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MEXICO CITY (AP) -- The Mexican government and private companies launched a project Monday to map the genes of Mexicans, in hopes of developing treatments for health problems such as diabetes, asthma and hypertension.

Based on the Human Genome Project, the effort is the largest study of Latin American genes and could usher in a new medical era for the region, authorities said.

Completed in 2003, the Human Genome Project was a 13-year project coordinated by the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health to identify all the approximately 20,000-25,000 genes in human DNA.

Mexico's National Institute of Genomic Medicine will work with California-based Applied Biosystems Group, part of Applera Corp., and IBM's Healthcare and Life Sciences division on the project to map the genes of Mexicans.

The research could lead to medications designed for specific individuals and the health problems they face, said Mexican Health Secretary Julio Frenk. He said the research could help doctors shift medical science "from one of diagnosis and treatment to one of foreseeing and preventing."

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Frenk spoke at a ceremony at the country's Genomic Medicine institute, which was established to research ways to improve health care by using recently mapped genetic information.

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Tony L. White, CEO of Applera Corp, said that genetic research presages a new way of viewing disease.

"This is what's going to turn medicine from an empirical science, where you just kind of guess what's wrong with someone based on symptoms, to a fact-based science where we understand the molecular basis of the disease at the individual level or the gene level, and then you work back from there for a cure," White said.

Frenk said similar research is already underway in Africa, Japan, Europe and the United States.

Besides mapping genes, the Genomic Medicine institute and Applied Biosystems will launch a pilot project looking for genetically based drugs specific to Latin Americans and those of Latin American descent.

On the Web:

<http://www.inmegen.gob.mx>

<http://www.appliedbiosystems.com>

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