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## Human genetics: historical and personal perspectives

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Modern genetics can be considered to have begun just over a century ago, with the rediscovery of Mendel's work, a time coinciding closely with the recognition of the role of chromosomes in inheritance. While human genetics has played an important part throughout this century of genetics, it is only over the past 50 years that it has become defined as a specific scientific discipline in its own right, while its applications in medical genetics have largely occurred over the past 30 years.

The relative youth of our field offers special opportunities for capturing and recording its early history, since many of the key founders across the world are still living and, indeed, are often still active in research. The opportunity will soon pass, though, and there is a danger that many of the primary records and memories will be irretrievably lost; some already have been.

It could rightly be argued that the peer-reviewed scientific literature should stand as the permanent record of progress in this field, as in other areas of science. This is indeed true, but there are many aspects that do not appear in the published record, notably the lives and personalities of the workers involved and their interactions, but also the social and even political factors that influenced their work and how it was received.

The detailed analysis of these factors requires the skills of the historian and social scientist that most workers in human genetics do not possess. However, we do have the great advantage that 'we were there', giving us both the right and the duty to record these major contributions of science from our own personal and scientific perspectives. Unless we do this, and do it soon, the work of the future historian will be more difficult and the sources for analysis less rich.

The series of articles that now begins in *Human Genetics* hopes to capture some of these personal perspectives on the early history of our field. Contributions

will be welcomed from all areas of human and medical genetics, interpreted in the broadest sense. No single or specific theme is planned, although themes may emerge. Contributions will be edited, and reviewed as appropriate, but will not always be classed as 'original articles'. It is hoped that some articles will develop from informal pieces in the recently established *Genetics and Medicine Historical Network* newsletter, its associated workshops and website (<http://www.genmedhist.net>), as well as from other initiatives in different countries to record important historical contributions. Photographs and other illustrative materials will be especially welcome to accompany any article, or indeed to form its main substance; short notes are as welcome as more substantial pieces.

Other initiatives developing within the genetics community alongside the present series of 'historical and personal perspectives' include an oral history archive of interviews with older workers in human genetics, a programme of preserving and archiving the personal scientific records of key deceased or retired workers, a collection of major books to form a 'Human Genetics Historical Library', and a series of historical workshops relating to genetics. As these initiatives develop, we should be able to see a broad foundation of historical material emerging that documents the origins and development of human and medical genetics.

The success of these plans will require the involvement and efforts of a range of people with differing interests and backgrounds, historians and social scientists, as well as laboratory geneticists and clinicians. Contributing to this series of articles in *Human Genetics* will be one valuable way of ensuring that as accurate and diverse a documentation as possible of the early history of our field is achieved, and that it is preserved for those who come after us.

Articles to be considered for this series should be submitted to the Editorial Office (European), *Human Genetics* in the usual way. Preliminary enquiries about possible contributions are welcome and may be made either to the Editorial Office (European or North

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American), or to Professor Peter Harper (HarperPS@cf.ac.uk), who will act as co-ordinator and who will also welcome enquiries about other material that might be suitable for the *Genetics and Medicine Historical Network* initiative and website <http://www.genmedhist.net>