

Faded Genes

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May 3, 2008

In high school biology, we studied Gregor Mendel's genetic squares. I discovered that I had just about every recessive gene that exists: I have blue eyes, I have wavy hair, my earlobes are attached to my head, my second toe is longer than my big toe, I have hair on the second knuckle of my fingers and I can't roll my tongue.

Basically, I'm a genetic freak. To make things worse, my two kids unfortunately inherited half of their genes from me. Because my wife is a dream woman in every sense of the word, including her genes, thankfully my recessive quirks stayed that way.

Thanks to a new law passed by the Senate last week, my goofy genes can't be held against me. The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act was passed by a 95-0 vote and heads to the House of Representatives this week. Supported by President Bush, it has a good chance of passing.

The Act bars employers from using genetic information in hiring, firing or promotion decisions. Likewise, health insurance companies could not use genetic information to establish premiums or deny enrollment because a person may suffer a costly disease in the future. However, insurance companies still have the right to base coverage and pricing on the actual presence of a disease.

The Act was passed in response to employers using genetic information against employees. While not yet a widespread practice, a Texas-based railroad did test employees suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome and argued their injuries weren't job related if they were genetically predisposed to the affliction.

Passing the law would be a first in the civil rights movement in that it was introduced to prevent discrimination before it became endemic. Currently, there are more than 1,100 genetic tests available which could lead to early, lifesaving therapy for a wide range of diseases with hereditary links such as breast and prostate cancer, diabetes, heart disease, Parkinson's disease, cystic fibrosis, Huntington's disease or Lou Gehrig's disease.

I'm glad to know that if my mutant toes cause me back pain down the road, my insurance company can't drop me.