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Israeli scientists 'track' ancestors using DNA test

By Nathan Jeffay, August 30, 2012

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An Israeli scientist claims to have developed a way of accurately establishing where a person's parents, grandparents and ancestors hail from by analysing their DNA.

Eran Halperin of Tel Aviv University developed a mathematical algorithm for extracting information about family origins from a DNA sequence called the single-nucleotide polymorphism. He made the breakthrough in partnership with Elazar Eskin, a computer scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The method was tested on genetic samples from 1,157 people, and in most cases provided the place of origin of both parents to within several hundred miles.

The analysis works because different mutations in the single-nucleotide polymorphism are common in different parts of the world, and the researchers constructed a special "genetic map" to help them decode their samples.

"If you have people who don't know where their families come from, this could help people learn about their ancestry," Dr Halperin said.

Beyond this, he said, the method could have important health benefits, as vulnerability to many genetic disorders is connected to geographic origin, yet many people are unaware of their vulnerabilities as they know little about where they come from.

"This has major potential for increasing knowledge about disorders and helping understanding of the connections between geography, genetics and diseases," Dr Halperin said.

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