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Cover: The layers of ice covering Greenland hint at an unknown climatic rhythm pulsing throughout the last 10,000 years, a time of supposedly stable conditions. Scientists are trying to track down what force causes this cycle and how much it has affected the planet in recent decades. (Photo: R. Monastersky)



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Science Service, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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Letters

Genetic tests: No dilemma for docs

In "Testing Genes" (SN: 12/9/95, p. 394), you quote Wertz as being "appalled that [genetic] tests were so available to the public in general" and as saying that genetic tests should benefit the child being tested, whereas there is no documented benefit of testing for cystic fibrosis carrier status.

I am appalled at her stance on this issue. Genetic testing does not pose a danger to the patient. Moreover, knowing whether you are a carrier of cystic fibrosis might change your life significantly.

To wit:

It might change the focus of your charitable work and contributions. It might change your political choices. It might change the amount of insurance you carry. It might prompt you to seek out genetic testing on newly conceived children in time to abort them or to be more conscientious about birth control to avoid having a child that may well die before

reaching adulthood. It might prompt you to screen potential mates for carrier status.

The only real problem with genetic testing is lack of privacy, in that testing can result in loss of health insurance.

In the survey of women undergoing routine mammography, where 90 percent said they would want to be tested for *BRCA1*, I suspect the only variable that drastically reduced the "want to know" response was the prospect of simultaneously learning that they were pre-disposed to breast cancer and that they *were therefore no longer insured*.

I see no basis for these doctors' apparent belief that such information should be restricted. Benefits do not have to be documented to be real.

We all have the right to know as much about our potential future as we choose to learn. It is morally wrong to restrict anything that can shed light on this future, even if the light is imperfect.

Anthony M. Castaldo
San Antonio, Texas

Physicians need not wrestle with the information that genetic tests provide. There is a health professional trained specifically for this task: the genetic counselor.

A genetic counselor can provide information to a patient regarding the risks, benefits, and limitations of a genetic test, thus facilitating an informed decision by the patient. Counselors are also trained to help an individual assimilate a test result that reveals a genetic disease or susceptibility to disease into his or her concept of self, as well as into future planning.

Genetic counselors are certified by the American Board of Genetic Counseling.

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