Symposium: Workshop on Inherited Breast Cancer in Jewish Women: Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications

Maxwell J. Mehlman

*Case Western University School of Law, maxwell.mehlman@case.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/faculty_publications](https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/faculty_publications)

Part of the Health Law and Policy Commons

**Repository Citation**
[https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/faculty_publications/545](https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/faculty_publications/545)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.
SYMPOSIUM: WORKSHOP ON
INHERITED BREAST CANCER IN
JEWISH WOMEN: ETHICAL,
LEGAL, AND SOCIAL
IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

ON APRIL 26, 1996, the Law-Medicine Center and the
Center for Biomedical Ethics at Case Western Reserve University
held the first national workshop on the ethical, legal, and
social implications associated with recent discoveries linking
the BRCA1 breast cancer gene to a specific population, that of
Ashkenazic Jewish women. The idea for this workshop origi­
nated with Tom Murray, Director of the Center for Biomedical
Ethics at the School of Medicine; Eric Juengst, the first direc­
tor of the ELSI program at NIH and now a professor at the
School of Medicine, and myself. The three of us also served as
moderators during the workshop. We wish to thank the Leon­
ard and Harvey Krieger President’s Endowment Fund for its
generous support, without which this program would not have
been possible.

In 1995, researchers identified a gene — BRCA1 —
which appears to be associated with an elevated risk of breast
cancer in some women. Initially, there was little interest in
screening women for the BRCA1 gene because it had many
mutations, each one of which would have to be tested for indi­
vidually, but no single one of which was prevalent in a signifi­
cant number of breast cancer patients. Later, researchers an­
nounced that one BRCA1 mutation is associated with breast
cancer that affects one percent of all Ashkenazic Jewish wom­
en, and accounts for almost forty percent of the breast cancer
cases in this population.
The possibility of population-based genetic screening for this mutation raises a number of ethical, legal, and social issues. In-depth discussion of these issues at the CWRU workshop provided significant insights for religious and community leaders, public health officials, clinicians and genetic counselors, and public policy analysts. The results of the workshop will be of further significance for ethnically based genetic screening programs in general, since it is expected that, in the future, researchers will discover many additional genetic mutations associated with disorders within specific ethnic groups.

The workshop was an informal exchange among invited experts in a variety of disciplines in a rapidly developing area. The discussion focused on seven papers that are being published in this symposium volume. An account of the workshop, prepared by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist B.D. Colen, has appeared in the newsletters of the Center for Biomedical Ethics and the Law-Medicine Center.

Maxwell J. Mehlman†

† Arthur E. Petersilge Professor of Law and Director, The Law-Medicine Center.