



# JEWISH GENEALOGY

## Your "Health Tree" Can Be A Lifesaver

### Miriam Weiner

Knowing your family health history could save your life. Researchers now are studying family trees to get to the root of genetic diseases.

The value of family medical histories is evident for anyone who has visited a physician or been confined in a hospital. The questions asked immediately after "What's bothering you?" have to do with whether or not your parents are alive or deceased; if the latter, the cause of death; and the state of health of brothers and sisters. You also will be asked about the illnesses associated with your grandparents, and the cause of their deaths.

This is not a simple exercise in medical inquisitiveness. Your responses become a permanent part of your own medical history. As can be seen, genetics can play a vital role in your life.

If the roots of your family tree are diseased with such common problems as heart disease, strokes, high blood pressure, cancer, glaucoma, or diabetes, it may be possible for you to take steps to postpone getting the disease or to prevent it altogether.

By researching your family's health tree, you can provide family members with a medical genealogy containing important information about the health history of your ancestors.

These data can be used in many ways. For example, knowing that a certain illness "runs in the family" can guide you to good preventive health care.

Genetic diseases have developed as a result of historical and geographical circumstances. When a community has been isolated over a period of time and there is consanguinity—a pattern of marriage among close relatives, such as first

cousins, or uncle and niece—it is not unusual for genetic conditions and diseases to develop. In general, all people carry eight to 10 genes for possible diseases, but they are un-

derstandably retarded during the early stages of development of a baby or child. It kills its victims before their fifth birthday. At present, no treatment is available for Tay-Sachs dis-

ease or "idiotic". The 1880 census also has a column to indicate any sickness or disability and whether the person was maimed, crippled, bedridden, or disabled.

In compiling a medical family tree chart, the 1860-1885 mortality schedules can be valuable. These schedules list those who died during the 12 months prior to the census (June 1 through May 31 of 1849, 1859, 1869, 1879, and 1885). Locating these records can be worth the effort. They provide name, age, place of birth, profession, occupation or trade, cause of death, and length of illness.

Both census and mortality schedules can be found at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., or in its regional branches throughout the country.

The March of Dimes provides a family health tree chart. It has places to indicate date of birth, occupation, significant medical conditions or disorders, health-related habits such as smoking and drinking, cause and age of death of family members. To obtain a free Family Health Tree chart, Genetic Counseling booklet, and Family Medical Record/Health History, contact your local chapter of the March of Dimes.

Recent advances in medical science have made it clear that good health can be an important part of the legacies we leave our descendants. Armed with knowledge of our family's medical history, we may be able to prevent or minimize illnesses that afflicted our ancestors.

Compiling a medical genealogy is a good project for grandparents, whose personal knowledge of the family's health history usually spans five generations—reaching back to their own grandparents and extending to their grandchildren.

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### It is a legacy money cannot buy.

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aware of it unless a particular disease strikes.

Many genetic disorders are found to a greater extent among members of certain ethnic groups than in the general population. Fortunately, most genetic diseases are extremely rare. However, there are a few that occur in high frequency and are, therefore, of concern. There are inexpensive and effective tests to determine whether you are a carrier.

As part of its continuing effort to educate the public, the National Foundation for Jewish Genetic Diseases, Inc. (NFJGD), distributes an informative pamphlet describing seven diseases that affect Ashkenazi Jews. The foundation raises funds to disseminate information and sponsor medical research, symposia, and publications.

For a free copy of the pamphlet and for information on the activities of the NFJGD, write to 250 Park Avenue, Suite 1000, New York, NY 10017.

Tay-Sachs disease is the most well-known Jewish genetic disease, afflicting about one in every 2,500 Ashkenazi Jewish babies. This disease is characterized by the onset of severe mental and developmen-

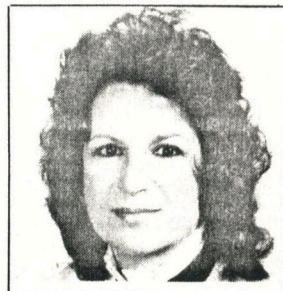
tal retardation during the early stages of development of a baby or child. It kills its victims before their fifth birthday. At present, no treatment is available for Tay-Sachs dis-

ease, but there is a simple blood test to determine if you are a carrier. Emphasis has been placed on public education, carrier screening, and prenatal diagnosis for the prevention of this devastating disease.

Families affected by Tay-Sachs disease may wish to contact the Tay-Sachs Prevention Program, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA 19107 [phone: (215) 928-8320], or the National Tay-Sachs and Allied Disease's Association, 385 Elliot Street, Newton, MA 02164 [phone: (617) 964-5508].

Medical research ultimately will lead to a decline in Jewish genetic diseases among children. Other factors leading to a reduction of these diseases include the dramatic decrease in consanguinity, even among Israel's Oriental and Sephardic Jews, the increase in intermarriage of Jews of different backgrounds, genetic counseling, and the shrinking size of Jewish families.

Genealogists accumulate data about family members from U.S. censuses. Census records from 1850 to 1910 contain columns of information pertaining to the physical or mental condition of individuals, such as "deaf, dumb, blind, insane,



The benefits of tracing your family health tree can extend far beyond the medical knowledge gained. It is a good family project. The hours spent looking through old records, and jogging family memories, can help build a strong feeling of family satisfaction and pride.

Most importantly, it will give your descendants something precious that may make a great difference in their lives. It is a legacy money cannot buy.

For further reference, see *Genetic Diseases Among Ashkenazi Jews* (1979), edited by Richard M. Goodman, M.D. and Arno G. Motulsky, M.D. It is available from Raven Press, 1185 Avenue of the Americas, 37th Floor, New York, NY 10036 (470 pp., \$71.50); and *Genetic Disorders Among the Jewish People* by Richard M. Goodman, M.D. (1979), The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD 21218 (560 pp., \$32.50).

*A Beginner's Guide* (55 pages) on how to research your family history—including charts, a list of archives and libraries, maps, bibliography, family group sheets, and more—can be ordered from Miriam Weiner, in care of this paper (cost: \$10).

Miriam Weiner is a columnist and lecturer specializing in Jewish genealogy and Holocaust research. For information on how to research your family history, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Weiner, c/o San Diego Jewish Times, 2592 Fletcher Parkway, El Cajon, CA 92020.