

23andMe focuses on data portal for researchers

In less than a decade, biotech company 23andMe has turned a refrigerator full of spit into one of the largest databases of personal genetics information in the world.

The brainchild of Anne Wojcicki, the wife of Google co-founder Sergey Brin, 23andMe began in 2006 as a startup mailing DNA testing kits to customers' front doors and asking them to mail back a vial of saliva. Eight years later, the company is the gatekeeper of a database of hundreds of thousands of people's DNA — a self-described Google for genetics information.

"It's actually bigger than anything else I can think of, way bigger," said Lisa Brooks, program director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health.

23andMe has begun selling that genetics data to researchers and pharmaceutical companies to conduct large-scale medical studies, making it an emerging leader in a largely underexplored, and at times hotly debated, area of scientific research. In the last couple of months, 23andMe has announced a joint effort with Pfizer to research inflammatory bowel disease, released findings from a joint study of more than 100,000 people that made new discoveries on Parkinson's disease, and received a \$1.4 million grant from the NIH.

But as the guardian of a very lucrative set of data — the accuracy of which has come under question — critics say the Mountain View company also may pose a threat to consumers' privacy.

Most medical studies take months or years to solicit enough volunteers. But 23andMe puts the genetic information of 700,000 people at researchers' fingertips, allowing medical studies to be fast-tracked and new treatments to make their way into hospitals sooner, experts say, giving patients with chronic diseases a better quality of life.

"Instead of actually having to do clinical trials the old-fashioned way, we can enable researchers to get their answers instantaneously," Wojcicki said in an interview with this newspaper. "And they pay us for that."

Read the full, original story: [23andMe aims to be Google for genetic research](#)