Heredity increasingly vital for understanding cancer risk

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis.

The discovery of the BRCA genes (and the resulting genetic tests) in the early 1990s is often touted as the watershed moment when genetics and heredity became important to cancer. This is not, however, the case.

We did not suddenly recognize that some cancers are hereditary once we could test for gene mutations.

Looking back at this history shows how scientists and the public tried to understand hereditary cancer risk well before we had the technology to discover mutations and test for genetic disorders. This history also demonstrates that the experience of hereditary disease and genetic testing is deeply gendered, affecting women and their reproductive choices.

BRCA mutations account for five to 10 percent of all breast cancers, yet discussion about cancer and risk have been, and continue to be, profoundly shaped by genetics.

But researchers had identified that some cancers, like breast cancer, could be hereditary as far back as the early 20th century.

In the 1910s, the Eugenics Record Office, headed by Charles Benedict Davenport, conducted research on hereditary cancers, collecting information on “cancer families” through pedigree charts and detailed medical histories.

Back then, people wanted to know about hereditary cancers for the same reason people might want to be tested for the BRCA mutation today — to understand their own risk and to make decisions about when or if to have children.

Read full, original post: Our Obsession With Hereditary Cancers Didn’t Start When We Discovered The Breast Cancer Gene