Many doctors reluctant to embrace personalized medicine

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Tailoring treatments to genetic makeup is part of the futuristic vision of personalized medicine, where all care is custom-fit to an individual's DNA. Remarkably, part of that vision—genetic drug matching, called pharmacogenomics—is already here. Although total human genome sequencing costs $1,000, getting drug-gene results on a few hundred genes at St. Jude costs about half that much for each patient. "The era of precision medicine is upon us," says Dan Roden, assistant vice chancellor for personalized medicine at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. "The low-hanging fruit here is pharmacogenomics."

Unfortunately this fruit is being plucked by only a handful of hospitals. Lack of insurance coverage for the tests, along with confusion among doctors about what to do with the genetic data, is preventing the exams from being widely used.

The sad result, advocates say, is that people are getting sick needlessly. Roughly 50 percent of hospital patients get a drug in any one-year period that could cause serious side effects because of that person's genetic makeup, according to analyses from St. Jude and Vanderbilt. One study at Vanderbilt, which examined only six drugs, estimated that drug-gene tests could eliminate some 400 adverse events in a patient population of 52,942. If tests were performed for more than six drugs across the U.S. population, that number of avoided ailments would likely climb into the hundreds of thousands.

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