Viewpoint: Consumers gain little from 23andMe’s screening for BRCA cancer genes

This month [March], the FDA granted the genetics company 23andMe permission to offer direct-to-consumer testing for three of the more than 1,000 known variants of the genes BRCA1 and BRCA2 that have been found to confer an increased risk of breast and ovarian cancer. (The tests were previously only available through a doctor.)

But not everyone is celebrating. Because the gene variants found by the test are extremely rare, most people who take the test won’t come away with much meaningful information, and there’s no good evidence that people who take the test will be better off than those who don’t.

What we have is a clash of philosophies: Should consumers have a right to information that some experts have deemed unhelpful and potentially harmful for most people?

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[23andMe CEO Anne Wojcicki said] even though there aren’t many carriers of BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutations, some women who could benefit from screening aren’t getting tested. And even if the test doesn’t change what you know about your cancer risk, Wu said, “the results can still inform your conversations with your doctor.”

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The marketing of these tests “thrives on the idea that people can make their own decisions,” [epidemiologist Cecile] Janssens said. If a customer believes that the test has utility for them, then in their view, it does.

Read full, original post: Anyone Can Now Take This Breast Cancer Gene Test, But It Probably Won’t Tell You Much