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## Our Opinion: Genetic testing

### TMH offers doctors a powerful new weapon

In the old days, the family doctor would thump your knee, listen to your chest and tell you to say "Ahhh."

Today? Well, doctors still thump, listen and look. But 21st century physicians have so many more tools at their disposal.

One major advance in medicine is the use of DNA analysis to help diagnose diseases or even warn patients about diseases they might not even have yet. And our city has taken a big step forward with the opening of the Clinical Genetics Center at Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare.

Except for some prenatal testing, area residents have had to go to Tampa, Jacksonville or Gainesville for a genetic diagnosis. Now, TMH can provide answers about a diagnosis (such as autism or genetic syndromes) or help people who may have a hereditary condition (such as breast cancer or certain heart disorders).

However, it isn't as simple as analyzing one's DNA, pressing a magic button and fixing what's wrong.

Before a drop of blood is sent off for testing, a patient will have a referral to the genetics center by a primary physician, a full physical and a review of a complete medical history. If genetic testing does indicate a problem, or a potential problem, then it's time to create a care plan for the patient and the primary physician, one that might involve treatments, regular tests, X-rays, etc.

"A large part of genetics is the conversation," said Dr. Lea Kristin Parsley, medical director of the genetics center. Explaining how the services go far beyond just a simple test, she said, "We are a consultative service for diagnostics evaluations and care plans."

In other words, there's still a lot of good old-fashioned medical care involved.

Genetic testing is not without controversy. Some wonder whether it's worth knowing you have a tendency toward a condition that might never manifest itself. Others ask whether it's advantageous to know you have a disease for which there may be no cure. Dr. Parsley understands.

"What can you gain from knowing?" she said. "And what can you gain from not

knowing?"

A positive test for Huntington's disease, an incurable degenerative disorder, might be something that a patient would rather not know. But for a patient with a genetic predisposition toward breast cancer, knowing and then getting a regular MRI and mammogram would be an excellent idea.

Dr. Parsley is dedicated to improving treatment through genetic testing — and dedicated to this area. A native of North Florida, she was with the FSU College of Medicine, then went to Denver for training with the goal of coming back to North Florida to offer genetic services.

Well, she's back. And with her help, TMH will be helping doctors provide better health care to the people of Tallahassee and the Big Bend.