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Human Genetics: The Molecular Revolution and Its Ethical Consequences

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ABSTRACT Recent progress in molecular human genetics, while opening up new and unexpected prospects for medical diagnostics, prognosis, and therapy, poses a great number of ethical problems. Some of them are discussed in four steps:

1. X-linked mental retardation is taken as one example for progress in molecular diagnostics in one special field. Here, ethical aspects of prenatal diagnostics and abortion are discussed.
2. In a second part, issues such as preimplantation diagnosis, embryonal cloning, and the possible use of embryonic stem cells are reviewed.
3. It is becoming increasingly possible to diagnose disease susceptibilities using molecular methods. This raises questions of patient autonomy, on the one hand, and justice for the population as a whole, on the other. For example: Should a life or health insurance company be allowed to ask for genetic information?
4. The fourth - and possibly most controversial - group of ethical problems is posed by research priorities. Here, studies on molecular aspects of infectious diseases should have high priority.

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