

Fedhealth's new model of genetic testing is transforming precision medicine

A new partnership between Fedhealth Medical Scheme and medical bio-tech company, Intelligene offers exciting opportunities for genetic testing to improve the efficiency of medication, mitigate health risks by identifying possible future illnesses, and even optimise an individual's lifestyle by pinpointing the nutrition and lifestyle best suited to their genetic make-up.



Source: [Rxabay](#)

While most health systems are designed to be reactive – we wait until the onset of disease and then respond: precision medicine is quickly transforming healthcare from a reactive to a much-needed proactive model.

Besides finding out our predisposition to certain illnesses, personalised genetic testing can allow people to get a much more detailed picture of their overall health. This includes how they absorb nutrients like vitamin D, which sports their body will respond to better, and which medication will give them the best results to treat their existing health conditions..

With this programme, Fedhealth is one of the first open medical aid schemes in South Africa to be offering precision medicine-based genetic testing directly to its members, in partnership with local medical bio-tech company Intelligene.

“Whether it’s a better understanding of themselves, avoiding unnecessary blood tests, knowing which nutrients they require more of, finetuning their exercise routines or taking the appropriate medication or supplements, genetic testing is hugely

motivational and empowering for patients,” says Christa North from Intelligene.

Through the use of pharmacogenetics – the study of how a person’s genes affect the efficacy of certain medications – patients’ health can be vastly improved, as they’ll know ahead of time whether a medication is likely to benefit them and is safe to take.



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It can also help doctors select the medications and doses best suited for each person, which in turn could improve treatment success, as well as reduce healthcare costs.

A US study from 2018 predicted that pharmacogenetic-guided medication management for depression would result in annual savings of over \$3,900 per year (around R67,500) per patient.

As part of the pilot programme, Fedhealth has identified a group of members currently using chronic medication to manage one of five specific conditions, including diabetes and hypertension. They’ll offer free genetic testing to these members to test for drug-to-person interaction to identify whether the medication they’re using is doing the best possible job to manage their condition.

Identifying at-risk patients

They’ll also be offering gene testing to members with a specific claim history to see if they’re at risk for contracting certain diseases. This testing could reveal, for example, that a person’s body doesn’t process sugar properly, which means they’re at a higher risk of developing diabetes. While they may feel healthy at the moment, knowing this now means that they can make lifestyle changes to ensure that they don’t become diabetic in future.

The gene testing itself is painless and requires a simple cheek swab to be taken and sent to the laboratory for testing. There it is processed and over 800,000 gene data points are collected, after which it is stored in a secure vault.



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Beyond the initial pilot programmes starting in March 2023, Fedhealth has negotiated a special rate for those members who voluntarily want to have gene testing performed – and members can customise testing for things like illness pre-dispositions or gathering lifestyle data such as optimal nutrition or sports they’re best suited to.

“If our pilot programmes start to deliver results in terms of people receiving better quality care and reducing healthcare costs, we plan to roll gene testing out on a bigger scale so that it becomes an ongoing part of our patients’ treatment programmes,” says Fedhealth principal officer, Jeremy Yatt.

The human body is complex and affected by many factors, but Yatt believes that knowledge is power. “We’re excited about the potential for this technology to improve our members’ healthcare and wellbeing, as well as empowering medical professionals to make better decisions,” Yatt concludes.

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