THE CHRISTMAS GENE

Sarah May, Deputy Chief Executive of the IBMS, on the arrival of the festive season.

I am so relieved that the human genome has been mapped because I know it is now only a matter of time before the C-gene is discovered, its effect on behaviour better understood and, in very severe cases, treatments developed. I am of course referring to the Christmas gene, whose influence is once again reaching its annual peak.

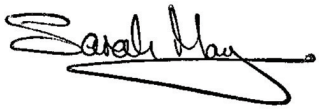
This elusive gene is probably autosomal dominant, as its expression is widespread and men and women appear to be roughly equally affected. However, the mode of expression varies slightly in that women suddenly have an overwhelming urge to wear sequins, while normally conservative male dressers find the allure of a primary coloured jumper or tie, with images of snowmen, reindeer or Father Christmas, to be totally irresistible. Both sexes exhibit a matching enthusiasm to decorate their homes with anything that sparkles or twinkles.

Another peculiarity of its expression is that it appears to trigger a highly competitive trait in certain individuals, creating the suburban equivalent of Star Wars – Light Wars. Gene-influenced neighbours vie to see who can cram the most lights around the eves, windows and trees in their front gardens. If this level of competitiveness could be harnessed by our Olympic athletes we would be awash with medals. However, it's a fine balance and one twinkle too many can condemn a household to the purgatory of bad light taste ridicule. Then there is the hot chestnut debate of white versus coloured lights and flashing versus static, not to mention the potential social suicide of "putting the lights up too early". Just remember, these individuals are at the mercy of their genes.

Some people try to mitigate the expression of their gene by attempting to be tasteful; they drag their eyes away from the plethora of bright red and gold and head for the cool blues and silver. But we're not fooled, they too have the C-gene. And there's no help for those who are straying into the pale pink and beige displays!

Those who carry this C-gene can be found in all walks of life; I remember the unnerving site of a senior mortician sitting in his office wearing a Santa hat; he carried the C-gene. Then there was the sheer excitement in a certain cytology laboratory when someone found a cluster of cells in a smear that looked exactly like a reindeer (pre-HPV testing days); they all carried the C-gene.

Now for confession time: I too carry that dominant C-gene. It's the only explanation for why I simply had to buy that multi-function string of 2000 warm white lights. It's a genetic thing and way beyond my control. So, let's embrace that gene, we'll all be back to normal again in January.



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