

FRANCIS SELLERS COLLINS

Few scientists have enjoyed the satisfaction of watching their research lead to a repeated and successful deciphering of the causes of diseases. Francis Collins, as perhaps the pioneering geneticist of his time, is one who has. Introducing the gene-finding method known as "positional cloning," now employed by scientists throughout the world, he concentrates on inheritance patterns of certain diseases within families in order to locate elusive and dysfunctional genes. The results have been astonishing! Working with a team of scientists in Toronto in 1989, he identified the gene, defects in which result in cystic fibrosis. He also helped to discover the gene that causes neurofibromatosis, a nerve disorder that leads to disfiguring and symptomatic cutaneous and internal tumors. More recently, he was a part of the team that identified the gene responsible for Huntington's Disease. From these discoveries, earlier and more accurate diagnoses are now being established, and new therapies are being pursued.

In 1993, he was named Director of the National Center for Human Genome Research in the National Institutes of Health. The multi-billion dollar Human Genome Project has established for itself the daunting goal of identifying by the year 2005 all the 100,000 genes in the human body. Despite the success that he has enjoyed in the basic science laboratory, Francis Collins has remained a physician at heart. He has always enjoyed the close personal relationship between physician and patient. Twice in the past few years, he traveled to Nigeria where he spent several weeks working as a physician in a small missionary hospital.

While completing his doctoral dissertation in physical chemistry, he enrolled in the School of Medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A three-week course on medical genetics captured his interest and redirected his goals toward a concentration in the study of genetics. After completing his M.D. here in 1977, he remained another four years in the School of Medicine as Intern, Assistant Resident, and Chief Resident.

When not engaged in the laboratory or traveling on behalf of his research, he relaxes with an acoustic guitar or a sojourn on his Honda Nighthawk 750 motorcycle.

His exploration of chromosome mapping and DNA sequencing has already dramatically altered our understanding of human genes and their influence upon diseases long considered unconquerable. Overseeing the deciphering of the complete genetic script in human cells, as well as measuring the ethical, legal, and social implications of such discoveries, he is now turning his attention to the identification of the genes responsible for breast cancer and adult leukemia. His discoveries are radically enhancing our knowledge of the human body, its care and preservation. For his commitment to that high endeavor, this University takes special pride in bestowing upon Francis Collins this honorary Doctor of Science degree.