

19/5/08 - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

GENETICISTS DISAPPOINTED WITH OFCOM RESPONSE TO ITV GENETIC TESTING PROGRAMME

Following a complaint from the British Society for Human Genetics (BSHG) concerning an ITV programme 'The Killer in Me', OFCOM has found that ITV was not formally in breach of its rules.

The BSHG, while disappointed with the decision, notes that OFCOM are critical of the impression given by the programme that the genetic tests offered were authenticated by a consensus of medical research, and were non-controversial. OFCOM also found that it was not apparent to the viewer that Genetic Health, the company featured in the programme, was a commercial organisation.

The programme, broadcast on 8th November 2007, followed four celebrities who were offered genetic tests to discover their risks of developing serious illnesses such as prostate cancer.

In its letter of complaint, the BSHG accused ITV of failing to provide any information about the scientific validity of the genetic tests being offered by Genetic Health. Chairman Dr Rob Elles said: "The BSHG is concerned that the uncritical journalistic and broadcasting standards demonstrated in this programme risk undermining the confidence of the public in the application of genetics, which has great potential to improve healthcare".

In its response, OFCOM highlighted the low risk of prostate cancer given to one of the programme participants following a test. The BSHG view is that this encapsulates the poor quality information and potential harm from this type of testing. A great majority of clinical geneticists would not advise a low risk in contradiction to his family history of prostate cancer, and consider that the 'test' offered has probably not been validated in specific population groups. Its use is therefore premature and represents the opposite of the individualised medicine that it purports to offer.

The BSHG believes that there is an important public service programme to be made in this area, looking at the science behind genetic testing and the discussion around validating tests for predictive use. The BSHG would very much like the Board of ITV to consider commissioning such a TV programme.