Public understanding of genetics and risk in Qatar: an anthropological investigation

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Background & Objectives:
Our research investigates the social implications of genetic knowledge in Qatar. Specifically, a social and cultural context for the specific interface between consanguinity and genetic risk is the focus. Genetic disorders are particularly significant in the Gulf region and the Middle East because of marriage among close relatives, which is a risk factor for genetic disorders. We are focusing on the way in which genetic knowledge is being negotiated and communicated in the region and on popular understandings of genetics and risk. Thus, this research will aim to map the perception of risk in Qatar.

Medical anthropology has shown the way illness and illness beliefs are shaped by culture. We consider the way that new medical information is interpreted along the backdrop of previously held cultural notions. New medical technologies are not transferred into cultural "voids" when they reach disparate societies. Prior ideas about kinship, reproduction and the causes of illness are likely to influence the way people interpret and negotiate genetic information. We investigate the meanings that are attached to the practice of genetic technologies and practice.

Methods:
This research uses the approach and methods of medical anthropology. Ethnographic methods provide an in-depth understanding of how genetic information is being developed and understood in Qatar. Our main method is semi-structured interviews. Anthropological methods are particularly appropriate for providing insight into the issue of perceptions of genetics as they will provide a means to developed a nuanced and layered understanding of the issue.

Results:
As the project is ongoing, we can only comment on preliminary findings. Qataris interviewed are aware of the discourse of genetics, but are actively involved in negotiating different arenas of risk. They are weighing up and engaging with risks such as those arising from environment; i.e. pollution, dust, nutrition. Our participants were aware of potential risks of consanguinity, but were balancing these with other concerns: such as the social risks of not marrying in the family.

Conclusions:
At this stage it is too early to comment on firm conclusions, but we are confident that our research is producing some nuanced and interesting data.