

Knowing your medical heritage can save your life

By **JANICE CRONAN**

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I recently attended the Pinellas Genealogy Society's Annual Seminar to hear Megan Smolenyak's presentation on DNA testing for genealogy research.

During a "break-off" session, which gave Megan a lunch break, I had the opportunity to attend another presentation. Since my interest in attending the seminar centered on how DNA testing might further my genealogical research, I chose the closely related topic: "Your Medical Heritage; How Genealogy Can Save Your Life!" Much to my pleasant surprise, this speaker was the genealogist who will be the featured speaker at the Bay County Genealogy Society's Annual Seminar on March 26 at Gulf Coast Community College. Her name is Debra Fleming, and she is known as The Ancestry Detective. For more information about her, and the upcoming seminar, visit www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~flbcgs/seminar/index.html.

Debra's presentation was absolutely "spell binding" because it was based on her own personal experience. She was able to save her husband's life through the knowledge she had gathered about his genetic history. Her husband had told her strokes "ran in his family." Because of this, Debra researched and compiled a family medical history back to his grandfather. She also learned about the symptoms of different types of stroke. When her husband, after playing outside with their son, was brought to her by their neighbor, she was able to identify his symptoms as those of an Ischemic stroke. This meant a blood clot was restricting the blood flow to his brain, so she had him

sit down; she called 911, and gave him an aspirin. All these actions contributed to his recovery. She encourages everyone to compile a medical history. If we know what medical conditions we might inherit from our ancestors, or the predisposition to other genetic risks, we might be able to help our loved ones, or ourselves just as Debra Fleming did.

The Utah Department of Health provides information about making a "family medical history kit." The website is <http://health.utah.gov/genomics/familyhistory/toolkit.html>.

To get the family member talking, ask about eye and hair color, height, weight and personality. Then share the reason you are doing this, and share your medical information with them. Be a good listener without judgment or opinions, and, above all, respect their privacy.

Another way to collect medical history is through death certificates. When ordering, state that you are a direct relative and you need the cause of death, so it will not be blocked out. Military medical files, hospital records, obituaries, old letters, diaries, court documents, draft registration files and immigration files are additional sources. Also, collect information on siblings because genetic traits might not always travel in a direct line.

The preparation of your medical genealogical history can help you identify symptoms of disease and illness. With the information from your tests, and the knowledge of your genetic traits and tendencies, your doctor can make a more informed diagnosis. He also can prescribe preventive measures and lifestyle changes to avoid early onset of some disease.