MARTIN BOBROW - "UNDERSTANDING COMMON DISEASE"

I think in the end, the real impact of genetics is undoubtedly going to be in understanding the chemistry of what goes wrong in disease. But that's a long way away. In the short term, lots of people are trying to make use of genetic information to predict disease and it's a surprisingly complicated thing to get one's head around.

Talking about gene variants associated with disease gets one to talking about what's called genetic determinism - the idea that if your genes say that's what's going to happen that's going to happen. And that's a mindset that comes from thinking about inherited diseases like muscular dystrophy and cystic fibrosis and haemophilia and Huntington's disease, where if your genes say that that's written in, the chances are that you really are going to get that. And that determinism implies that you're a bit helpless; it implies that it's going to happen to you and there's nothing much you can do about it. When you come away from these relatively uncommon, severe and often childhood diseases, into the things that geneticists are studying now: the much more common diseases like blood pressure and diabetes and arthritis, that determinism thing disappears to a large extent.

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