

Love: It's all in the DNA, U.S. firm says

Matchmaker pairs up by immune system

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The Ottawa Citizen

Thursday, February 14, 2008

Is your Valentine really rose- or chocolate-worthy? Before you spend, a Boston entrepreneur thinks a DNA test might provide the answer.

According to Eric Holzle, beauty may be skin deep, but the key to true love lies in a cheek swab. That's why his matchmaking site is pairing up people whose immune system differences would technically produce the healthiest relationships and children.

If his work is any indication, the pursuit of love is advancing just as fast as science is. Already in Japan, blood-type matchmaking is linking couples, the theory being that different blood types have distinct personalities.

The idea for ScientificMatch came to Mr. Holzle, a Boston-based mechanical engineer, five years ago, when he was in his basement watching a television program about the sweaty T-shirt test. In Swiss scientist Claus Wedekind's 1995 study, men were asked to wear T-shirts for two consecutive days. When women smelled the shirts, the majority liked the scent of guys with different immune systems from their own.

The belief is that animals and humans are wired to seek better immunity for their offspring, and finding a mate with different immune system genes is the way to do it. For years, scientists have thought that immune system genes vary and infer a distinct odour. The 1995 study showed a significant correlation between scent and mating preference. If it was true, it would mean that dating and mating had a lot more science behind it than most of us understood.

At least, Mr. Holzle thinks so. After five years, he developed a technique to analyse cheek swabs for genetic markers in the immune system. He believes this is more useful than smelling armpits or sniffing dirty clothes.

He launched ScientificMatch.com last December. The cost is \$1,995 for a lifetime membership, and there's a half-price discount this month. So far, the service is only available in the Boston area.

Mr. Holzle will not disclose membership numbers or the cost breakdown for his service. He admits it may seem pricey, but says monthly rates for online sites add up and offline matchmaking is in the thousands and none can guarantee actual chemistry.

"The biggest problem so far is that it sounds too good to be true," Mr. Holzle says.

At the University of Saskatchewan's reproductive biology research unit, reproductive endocrinologist Roger Pierson is trying to think of a polite way to say that it is. After taking a look at the website, he

agreed some of the science made sense, but extrapolating it to the point Mr. Holzle has done was deemed "fanciful."

Aside from finding the love of your life, Scientific-Match.com advertises other benefits: DNA-matched couples will have healthier children, better sex lives, smell better and will be less likely to cheat on each other. "It could literally be the difference between a bad relationship and one of bliss," the website pronounces.

Mr. Pierson, who has been married for several years, did not submit his wife to a DNA test before they were united.

"Science hasn't got a clue," he says. He says people attract and repel each other for a wide variety of reasons, and everyone from Dr. Phil wannabes to social anthropologists has a theory.

"Everyone has a partner out there, somewhere, that is going to meet the very basic human needs we require in a relationship," Mr. Pierson says.

In 2003, Statistics Canada reported that 38 per cent of marriages in Canada would end in divorce before couples reached their 30th wedding anniversaries. Tim Richardson, an e-commerce professor at the University of Toronto, says DNA testing reflects that statistic. It's a sign that people are getting decidedly pickier, and choosing mates as they would an automobile.

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