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Eugene Labs launches home kit for parents to test for genetic issues

EXCLUSIVE

By **DAVID SWAN**, REPORTER

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Melbourne-based genetic and health start-up Eugene Labs has launched its at-home, clinical-grade genetic test service, an offering it says is an Australian-first.

Eugene co-founder Kunal Kalro told *The Australian* the company's test is designed for couples to assess their risk of passing on serious genetic diseases to their children.

It combines a mail-in spit kit and online genetic counselling to test for 300 serious genetic diseases, providing medical advice that people and their doctors can act on in a clinical setting.

Mr Kalro said he started the company after realising genetic test results often weren't applicable, given datasets tend to focus on caucasian populations at the expense of everyone else.

He wanted to start a company that would help make genetics testing accessible and relevant for everyone, no matter the race or gender.

"I started talking to researchers, and they would emphatically say 'yes, there's a problem here and it's much worse than you think,'" he said. "The bias is a problem that leads to treatment guidelines, drug discovery, medication and recommendations that you and I will get at the doctor's office, so it's worse outcomes for everyone.

"Women, people of colour, every minority group, are actually the vast majority of the world. And it's a significant problem that the data sets were so biased, and I was interested to see what kind of solutions could be created to help address the gap."

The result is Eugene's gene carrier screen, which is now available across Australia for individuals and couples for \$479 and \$679 on www.eugenelabs.com.

Mr Kalro said 20 per cent of all infant deaths are due to genetic disorders, and carrier screening can help parents understand the risk before it happens.

“We’re the only end-to-end service offering consumers direct access to medical grade testing,” Mr Kalro said. “All couples are provided with genetic counselling and that’s a really important part of what we do. People need to know what the implications of their results are, and we want all of our results to be actionable.

“We believe in creating simplified information that is understandable by everyone, there’s no point just feeding people jargon.”

Eugene has raised \$525,000 from a range of stalwart angel investors from Australia’s health and start-up scene including alumni from Virtus Health, Culture Amp, Lonely Planet and Slater & Gordon.

Eugene investor and Melbourne IVF founder Dr John McBain said carrier screening will become the standard in pregnancy care in the next five years.

“My grandchildren will wonder how we did things any other way,” he said.

Megan Donnell, founder and CEO of Sanfilippo Children’s Foundation, said carrier screening is a simple thing to do but the difference it could make for parents and their children is literally life or death.

She said her children are both affected with genetic disorders, and a test like Eugene’s could have armed her with vital information before giving birth.

“I believe its every couple’s right to understand their genetics and make decisions that are right for them,” she said.

“If I had had the opportunity to undertake carrier screening prior to starting a family, I could have had healthy children. Instead, my children are both profoundly affected with a dreadful genetic disorder and I will inevitably lose them both in the next few years. “

Company co-founder Zoe Milgrom, a genetic counsellor, said there are 340,000 babies born every year, and most parents would want a test to understand potential health risks.

“There has not been a lot of awareness, access or availability for a test like this,” she said. “Now there’s a lot of movement in this space, and a lot of federal funding coming into the

area.

“We’re essentially helping address a gap in the system, creating access for the healthy population who wouldn’t normally have access to genetic counselling. For me that’s a really big deal ... There are only about 260 practising genetic counsellors in Australia, there physically aren’t enough trained people to support the market.”

Mr Kalro added that after the Australian launch, Eugene will be turning its focus to international markets.

“They’re critical for us,” he said. “Specifically Asia, India and the Middle East. They’re all going to be really important.”

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David Swan is a tech reporter for The Australian. With deep experience across start-ups, business and tech David is uniquely positioned to cover Australia’s fast-growing technology ecosystem and how it’s changi... [Read more](#)

