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The Curious Genetics of Werewolves

Posted December 27, 2012 by [Ricki Lewis, PhD](#) in [Uncategorized](#)



The “wolf boy” brothers have Ambras syndrome, a single-gene condition that may have inspired the werewolf legend. (Gary Moore photo)

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Growing up in the 1960s, I collected monster cards: T-60-foot-man and the 50-foot woman, duplicate bodies gestating in giant seed pods, unseen Martians that sucked children into sand pits and returned them devoid of emotion, with telltale marks on the back of the neck. One card featured a very young Michael Landon in “I Was a Teenage Werewolf.”

Forgive my lapse in political correctness, but I recalled those cards when I saw the word “hypertrichosis” in a recent paper in [PLOS Genetics](#), because, unfortunately, the condition is also known historically as “werewolf syndrome.”

In the paper, geneticist Angela Christiano, PhD, and colleagues at Columbia University analyzed the genomes of a father and son with Ambras syndrome, a form of hypertrichosis – and found something intriguing about the causative mutation that has repercussions for genetic testing in general.

A WEREWOLF PRIMER

Before a genetic explanation for overactive hair follicles existed, werewolfism, aka lycanthropy, was thought to arise in eclectic ways: rubbing a magic salve into the skin, sleeping outdoors under a summer full moon, drinking from the pawprint of a wolf, or a devil’s curse. Werewolves were once considered to be giant extinct lemurs from Madagascar.

Armenian folklore describes a werewolf as a female criminal being punished by coming out at night and eating her children, and then her relatives’ children, in order of relatedness.

[← Previous](#)[N](#)**Ricki Lewis, PhD**  

Ricki Lewis is a science writer with a PhD in genetics. The author of several textbooks and thousands of articles in scientific, medical, and consumer publications, Ricki's first narrative nonfiction book, "The Forever Fix: Gene Therapy and the Boy Who Saved It," was published by Martin's Press in March 2012. In addition to writing, Ricki provides genetic counseling for parent-to-be at CareNet Medical Group in Schenectady, NY and teaches "Genethics" an online course for master's degree students at the Alden March Bioethics Institute of Albany Medical Center.

10 comments

Pingback: Everything You Need to Know about the Bizarre Genetics of Werewolves

**Jon**

December 31, 2012 at 1:55 am

Werewolves maybe real in the supernatural or alien sense (or even our material-based reality), but I think there is a bigger possibility that Sasquatch DNA is in these people with this syndrome. Seriously! Look at the Russian boy with the syndrome then and compare it to the Sylvania photo of a purportedly genuine Sasquatch...

<http://i1.ytimg.com/vi/DpJtuZ59Lg4/mqdefault.jpg><http://www.sylvanic.com/>

For all we know these are recessive genes from past interbreeding with homo sapiens by these people of the forest (Sasquatch etc) and mountains.

**Ricki Lewis, PhD**

December 31, 2012 at 9:28 pm

Yes Jon, hadn't thought of Sasquatch. Ambras syndrome isn't recessive — it's autosomal dominant.

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**Frank Norton**

December 31, 2012 at 8:20 pm

Darwin in his Origin of the Species, did not disclose how new species originate. He merely observed how existing species varied. In the chicken and the egg and who came first, what hatches from an egg is different from the one who laid the egg. Same with a human fetus. Each generation of human reproduction, the one born has some 141 mutations different from his parents, and siblings. The hair on a man's face is from genes of different grandfathers.

Likewise, the human fetus goes through several evolutionary development steps as the fetus cells divide. There is the fish, reptile, primate stages, that sometimes stay with the infant as body hair, scales, webbed feet, etc.

**Ricki Lewis, PhD**

December 31, 2012 at 9:30 pm

The "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" concept I don't think is meant to be literal — the early embryonic stages of many species resemble each other because the cells and tissues are moving in similar patterns

they sort themselves out. We don't really go through our ancestors.



Nancy Andrews

January 2, 2013 at 3:39 pm

Dear Dr. Lewis,

I enjoyed your article, as we have some common interests, you may be interested in my recent comic, Loupette and the Moon.

<http://bangordailynews.com/event/loupette-and-the-moon-an-art-and-medicine-talk-at-coa/>

<feed://www.graphicmedicine.org/tag/loupette-and-the-moon/feed/>

Best Regards,

Nancy Andrews

<http://www.nancyandrews.net>

<http://artandscienceofdelirium.wordpress.com/>



Mike

January 3, 2013 at 9:12 pm

Interesting and Happy New Year!

Pingback: [The Weekly Gnuz & Lynx Roundup — 2013/01/05](#) « [The Call of Troythulu](#)

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