

Letter to the Editor

Hemochromatosis Gene Nomenclature

To the Editor:

The gene symbol HFE has been in existence for many years in the human genetics community as the designated symbol for the gene for hemochromatosis, not of course identified at that time. The late Dr. Phyllis McAlpine, former chair of the Human Gene Nomenclature Committee (HGNC), approved the symbol and we are not certain what the letters originally stood for; maybe there was some clash with a more obvious symbol, or maybe FE was thought to be memorable because of the iron. However, the main purpose of assigning a symbol at that stage was to indicate its position easily on a genetic map.

The designation of the cloned gene (Genbank ID: U60319) as HLA-H, which appeared in *Nature Genetics* [Feder et al., 1996], was unfortunate for two reasons. One is that there is a strong HLA community who have strict criteria for accepting a "new" HLA gene and this gene does not satisfy these [WHO, 1976]. The other is that there was already an HLA-H pseudogene (Genbank ID: AF116214), which is well characterised [Geraghty et al., 1992] and only four megabases away on the same chromosome, so it was extremely confusing.

Nature Genetics received a number of protests and published two of them: Mercier et al. [1997] and Bodmer et al. [1997]. Both of these groups agreed to use HFE until the true normal function of the gene is established, when a more meaningful name and symbol could be adopted. This seemed the best solution and has gained some general acceptance.

The purpose of HGNC, a committee of HUGO (the Human Genome Organisation), is to designate consistent and universally acceptable names and symbols (abbreviations) for all human genes [White et al., 1997]. Ideally, the gene is ultimately named for its normal function, and of course we are not trying to influence the name(s) for the disease(s), although we always

retain these in our database as alternative symbols. Increasingly, journals are seeing the virtue of standard gene nomenclature and are beginning to insist on it (these journals now include *Nature Genetics*). We try hard to go with the decisions of the communities working on particular genes and gene families. Further information about nomenclature is available from our web page at (<http://www.gene.ucl.ac.uk/nomenclature/>) or by E-mail to the Nomenclature Editor at nome@galton.ucl.ac.uk.

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