

Skirmish at the Fountain of Youth

Twenty years ago the effort to sequence the human genome turned into a race between a consortium of publicly funded institutions and a company called Celera, with Craig Venter at its helm. Today, Dr. Venter is at the center of a lawsuit between a company he launched in 2013, Human Longevity, Inc. (“HLI”), and a non-profit corporation that he started years earlier, the J. Craig Venter Institute (“JCVI”).

Last week, HLI sued JCVI for trade secret misappropriation, as well as for conversion, tortious interference and unfair business practices. The claims are based on allegations that, after Dr. Venter was terminated from HLI, he continued to use an HLI-owned computer to access—and transmit—proprietary information. According to the Complaint in the action, the trade secrets accessible to Dr. Venter included at least HLI’s business plans, financial information (including existing and prospective sources of funding), the identities and contact information for HLI’s clients, market analyses, employee contracts, research data, and client results. HLI alleges that JCVI is in the process of using HLI’s trade secrets to establish a competing business, including soliciting HLI’s funding sources, employees, and clients.

What’s at stake? Potentially quite a lot. HLI is a health intelligence company with the goal of using data-sequenced genomes and phenotypic data—to proactively guide its clients to living healthier, longer lives. And it is not the only player in the growing longevity market. Whether the approach is pharmacological, big-data or direct-to-consumer, “anti-aging” science has huge potential. Extending our lifespans by even a couple of years may save \$7 trillion in healthcare spending over the next 50 years. Probably not quite what Ponce de Leon was after, but quite something nonetheless.

-SRP

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