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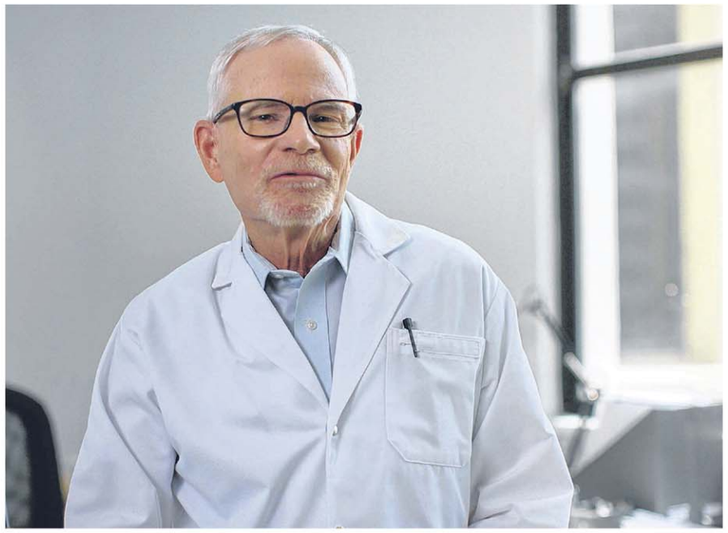

Human behaviour geneticist Richard Ebstein has partnered Scoot to study the link between genes and desire to travel, by inviting travellers to test for DRD4-7R, a gene variant linked to lower dopamine sensitivity. PHOTOS: SCOOT SINGAPORE

Bitten by the travel bug? It may be in your genes

Travellers being tested for 'wanderlust gene' under Scoot-sponsored study by NUS don

Rahimah Rashith

Some people have a stronger desire to travel than others, and science may know the reason why.

Human behaviour geneticist Richard Ebstein has partnered budget airline Scoot to study the link between genes and people's desire to travel.

Since last month, travellers, mostly Singaporeans, have been invited to be tested for a gene variant known as DRD4-7R, which has been dubbed the "wanderlust gene".

So far, 40 people have taken the test, which is conducted on saliva samples.

This research – set to end this month – will provide an initial glimpse into the genetic make-up of travellers, and could spark future in-depth research, said Professor Ebstein, who is from the Department of Psychology at the National University of Singapore.

Scientific studies have tried to link behaviour traits with DRD4-7R. The gene is a variant of DRD4, which is a receptor that controls the body's dopamine levels.

Dopamine is a brain chemical that controls the reward and pleasure system in the human brain.

When people have an enjoyable experience, dopamine is released.

Most people can get their dopamine fix from small things, such as eating chocolate or getting a text message from a loved one.

But others have a lower sensitivity to dopamine and therefore must look for bigger, more exciting experiences to increase their release of dopamine, say scientists.

Research shows that DRD4-7R is linked to lower dopamine sensitivity. About one in five people is thought to possess this gene, said Prof Ebstein.

One research participant who tested positive for the gene variant is Mr Vernon Chow.

The 27-year-old robotics engineer spent nine weeks travelling across Western Europe in 2016.

To date, he has travelled to more than 30 countries.

"I am not afraid of being uncomfortable when I travel," he said. "The test result is an ode to my adventurous side."

Research has also found that those with DRD4-7R seem to display riskier behaviour.

Other studies have linked the gene variant with human migration.

Prof Ebstein said there is no one gene that has a single effect on any behaviour, including wanting to migrate or travel.

"What we have are many genes, such as this one, that can ever so slightly change our personalities and make us more likely to travel or develop a passion for travel," he said.

DRD4-7R likely plays some role in our desire to experience new things, but it is not the only factor, he added.

"Like all human behaviours, environmental factors influence just as much as genetic make-up," he said.

For Mr Chow, testing positive for the gene is good enough validation. "I can safely say that travel is in my blood," he quipped.

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WANDERLUST GENE

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HUMAN BEHAVIOUR GENETICIST RICHARD EBSTEIN, about the gene DRD4-7R, which likely plays a role in the desire to experience new things, but is not the only factor. "Environmental factors influence just as much," he added.