Can MedGenome use genetics to predict cancer? VCs bet $4M on it

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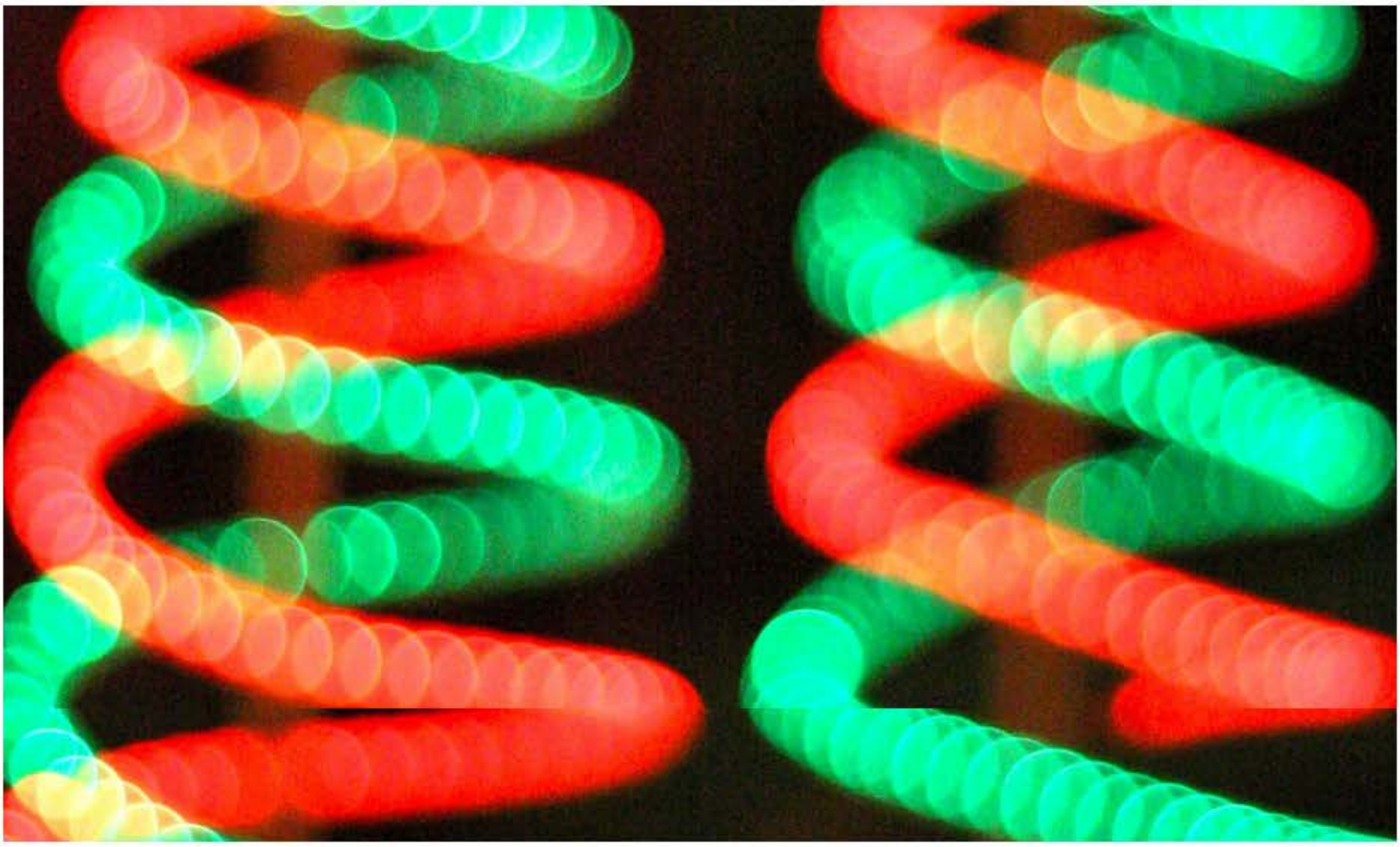

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The Indian genetic-research company MedGenome says it has taken $4 million in new funding to further develop and market its genetic-sequencing research on cancer victims.

MedGenome licenses a bioinformatics database called OncoMD, which contains more than 1.2 million cancer-related genetic mutations.

Papillon Capital's Kartik Kumaramangalam and Emerge Venture's Mahesh Pratapneni led the funding round, and it includes several other individual investors — all data-science executives.

"MedGenome is already the leader in the Indian genomics market," said MedGenome CEO Sam Santhosh in a statement today. "The new resources from this investment round will enable us to expand our research and make our tools more widely available to clinicians and hospitals developing personalized treatment strategies for cancer patients around the world."

Health-informatics businesses don't lend themselves to 30-second elevator pitches very well. Here's the short version, as MedGenome investor Dmitri Mehlhorn explained to VentureBeat.

In twins, who have very similar genes, it's easy for genetic researchers to understand the small differences that may have led to cancer in one twin but not in the other. Oncologists might be able to recognize that same genetic mutation in other people as a possible warning sign for cancer. But there are only so many twins to study.

So genetic researchers look for whole groups of people whose genetic makeups are very similar. For instance, the populations of Utah and Iceland are genetically quite homogeneous, and both of these groups have yielded a wealth of genetic lessons for medicine.

India, it turns out, has hundreds of genetically homogeneous castes, tribes, and ethnic groups. "It's like having a hundred Icelands in one country," Mehlhorn told me.

"MedGenome's database of genetic mutations can help physicians and hospitals pinpoint patients' mutation hotspots, identify prevalent cancer types, flag potential sensitivity to therapies, and link mutations to open clinical trials," as MedGenome puts it.

Mehlhorn says MedGenome is already profitable but needs the new funding to bring its cancer data to more hospitals and research institutions.