To celebrate Charles Darwin’s 200th birthday and the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*, we asked some Pitt med-ers and friends of the school this question: *Is there anything about the way the human body has evolved that you would have recommended against, had you been consulted?*

“Aging!!”

Mary L. Phillips
Director of Functional Imaging in Emotional Disorders
Professor of Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh

“I would have recommended that we live longer and reproduce less.”

Arthur S. Levine
Senior Vice Chancellor for the Health Sciences
Dean, School of Medicine
University of Pittsburgh

“There should be a way to indicate how a person is going to die. That way we could prevent certain deaths, like those related to heart disease or cancer, with earlier detection.”

Freddie Fu (MD ‘77, Res ‘82)
David Silver Professor and Chair, Orthopaedic Surgery
University of Pittsburgh

“Probably the biggest problems caused by our unique evolutionary history result from the adoption of bipedal postures by our ancestors sometime prior to 4 million years ago. This led to the bizarre ‘S-shaped’ vertebral column of humans (technically known as lumbar lordosis), which causes chronic lower-back pain in many people. Likewise, bipedalism has constrained human obstetrics, because there are limits to how large the birth canal can be without compromising bipedal locomotion. This explains why women walk and run (on average) in a less energy-efficient fashion than men do, and it also explains why labor is so long and arduous in humans.”

K. Christopher Beard
Adjunct Professor, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine
Curator and Mary R. Dawson Chair of Vertebrate Paleontology
Carnegie Museum of Natural History

“As a DNA repair person, my chief complaint is that for some reason placental mammals evolved to not express photolyases. These are enzymes that directly reverse DNA damage caused by UV light (sunlight). If humans still expressed these, the rates of skin cancer would be negligible.  

“Big mistake!”

Laura Niedernhofer
Associate Professor of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics
University of Pittsburgh

“There are so many I don’t know where to start. Our birth inlets and outlets are too small. Our anterior abdominal wall is too weak. The frontal sinuses give me (and most others) headaches for no reason. Our lower lumbar column is too lordosed. Those are starters. Of course, orthopaedic surgeons will give you many that they confront every day, but they are more anatomically detailed. Take for example the femoral head epiphysis—it is relatively easily disrupted during growth and can slip away from the femoral neck, which can lead to avascular necrosis. There are many defects at that anatomical level—the skeleton seems to be riddled with them.”

C. Owen Lovejoy
Associate Professor of Biological Anthropology
Kent State University
Collaborator with Pitt’s Freddie Fu

“The human body is the most perfect machine ever assembled—a combination of strength, dexterity, and resilience. It is the only machine that gets stronger with use, rather than wearing out. With sufficient training, humans can run a horse to death. Our crowning achievement is the amazing human brain, with the ability to reason, plan for the future, and decipher complex problems.”

Bert W. O’Malley (BS ’53, MD ’63)
Tom Thompson Distinguished Professor and Chair
Molecular and Cellular Biology, Baylor College of Medicine

—Compiled by Jamar Thrasher