Learning from history

Sir — Your leading article advocating a moratorium on human cloning[1] places the Berg letter, advocating a moratorium on recombinant DNA research, in 1976, and states that it "was soon followed by strict regulation" — two serious inaccuracies. Given that we are still running the same debate, at least in Europe, a quarter of a century later, *Nature* should get it right.

A biohazards conference was held at Asilomar, California, in February 1973, and in June that year the annual Gordon Conference on nucleic acids, held in New Hampton, New Hampshire, was also devoted to hazards in rDNA research. The co-chairs of the latter meeting addressed a letter to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the Institute of Medicine, requesting the formation of a study committee to assess the hazards and recommend appropriate action[2]. NAS appointed Paul Berg to chair the resulting study committee; its report was published in *Nature* and *Science* in July 1974 (ref. 3). It called for voluntary deferment of certain experiments, pending further research; for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to establish an advisory committee to develop guidelines; and for an international meeting, which took place in February 1975 at Asilomar.

Donald Fredrickson, the director of NIH, established the NIH rDNA Advisory Committee immediately afterwards, its first guidelines being released in June 1976. These were mandatory for NIH-supported research, and followed voluntarily by others. Contemporary demands to legislate for "strict regulation" were finally seen as unnecessary in the congressional debates over the following months and years.

Again, the parallel debate in Europe was interesting: the strict containment directive proposed by the European Commission in 1978 was in 1980 replaced by what was adopted as Council Recommendation 82/472 in 1982, advocating national registration of such research, and regular review over subsequent years in the light of experience with the conjectural hazards — an admirably pragmatic approach, now sadly abandoned. The United Kingdom's responses in 1974–76 were similarly practical — the Ashby working party set up in the month of the Berg letter reported by December 1974 (ref. 4), in time to influence the debate at Asilomar; the Williams working party set up thereafter published guidelines in August 1976 (ref. 5), allowing research to recommence.

After ten more years of debate and experience, the council of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development could conclude "that there is no scientific basis for specific legislation to regulate the use of recombinant DNA organisms"[6].

All of which confirms the empirical observation that "those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it".

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1. *Nature* **386,** 1 (1997).
2. Singer, M. F. & Soll, D. *Science* **181,** 1114 (1973).
3. Berg, P. *et al. Nature* **250,** 175 (1974); *Science* **185,** 303 (1974).
4. *Report of the Working Party on the Experimental Manipulation of the Genetic Composition of Microorganisms* (Ashby Working Party), Cmnd. 5880 (HMSO, London, 1975).
5. *Report of the Working Party on the Practice of Genetic Manipulation* (Williams Working Party), Cmnd. 6600 (HMSO, London, 1976).
6. OECD Council recommendation adopted 16 July 1986, published in *Recombinant DNA Safety Considerations* (1986).

Deserving of trust

Sir — The News article "UCSF settles lawsuit over research costs" (*Nature* **385,** 377; 1997) raises the unfair implication that the Ischemia Research and Education Foundation (IREF) is a mere shell created and manipulated by Dr Dennis Mangano to