

Germany funds two new bioethics programs

Germany was not among the 20 European countries which signed the European Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine treaty banning human cloning this January. However, the German research-funding body, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and the country's science ministry, the Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft, Forschung und Technologie (BMBF) have launched two new, five-year programs aimed at increasing the country's standing in bioethics.

The DFG will spend DM 1.5 million per year on ethics research projects which demonstrate a clear interdisciplinary technique. It is hoped that researchers with a theological and philosophical background will work together with sociologists, lawyers, scientists, and clinicians. Andreas Bell, a consultant in the fields of medicine and ethics, says that interdisciplinary ethics research will benefit the country as a whole. Bell points to the example of Denmark, where public discussion of bioethical issues has created a better environment for the biotechnology and phar-

maceutical industries. Meanwhile, the cities of Tübingen, Bonn, and Freiburg are competing to be the location of a new bioethics library, funded at a rate of DM 1 million a year by the BMBF. The library is modeled on the American Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University, Washington, DC and will provide information on ethical issues for both scientists and the general public.

ELLEN PEERENBOOM, COLOGNE

Japanese infectious diseases law

The Japanese Council on Public Health has recommended that the government works out a comprehensive law aimed at preventing infectious diseases. The law, slated for April 1999, would cover all infectious diseases including influenza, AIDS, Ebola and hemorrhagic fever and categorize them into four types, based on their infectivity and symptoms. It would focus on disease treatment and stipulate ways to prevent infection and to deal with diseases when they break out. This represents a change from the current legislature, which simply requires quarantine to prevent epidemics. The new legislation would also encompass two existing laws covering sexually trans-

mitted diseases, which would be abolished. The Health and Welfare Ministry plans to submit a bill for the law to the Diet this month.

KAREN BIRMINGHAM, NEW YORK

Roche rewards Icelanders

The Icelandic population is to be rewarded for its genetic homogeneity. Under an agreement signed by Roche and the Icelandic genomic company, deCODE, Icelanders will receive medications developed from the collaboration free of charge. The arrangement complements regulations introduced last November by the Icelandic parliament to protect patients rights and prevent biopiracy—companies wishing to exploit the country's gene pool must give something back to the community (*Nature Med*, 3; 1056, 1997). "This is the first example of recognition of the patient population's contribution to drug discovery by a pharmaceutical company," says deCODE president and CEO, Kari Stefansson. The five-year collaboration, estimated to be worth \$200 million to deCODE, is reported to be the largest to date between a major pharmaceutical and a genomics company.

KAREN BIRMINGHAM, NEW YORK



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