

Dismissal of bioethics council leads to speculation about its future

US President Barack Obama abruptly dissolved the President's Council on Bioethics in late June, with one day's written notice to members stating that their services were no longer needed. With its two-year term having been scheduled to end in September, the Council was set to meet one more time. A new commission is expected to be named by Obama by this fall, and it will be charged with developing actionable solutions to a range of emerging technology issues.

"The abruptness of its dismissal smacks more of politics than a reasoned consideration of issues," says David Prentice, a senior fellow at the Family Research Council, a conservative organization based in Washington, DC.

But Jonathan Moreno, a professor of medical ethics at the University of Pennsylvania, holds a different view. "I think we will see a real attempt to get beyond the culture wars of the past eight years," he says.

"It came as no surprise to us that President Obama wanted to develop a council of his own that would reflect his goals," says Ruth

Faden of the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics in Baltimore, Maryland. "It's not unusual for presidents to want their own advisory committees." The current council was established in 2001 by President George W. Bush, replacing President Bill Clinton's National Bioethics Advisory Committee.

Although names of potential members had not yet become public as *Nature Medicine* went to press, Moreno anticipates that the composition of the new council will differ dramatically from the past: "I expect we will not see more of the usual suspects." Rather than choosing bioethicists from a range of disciplines, Moreno expects that membership will draw on a wider range of distinguished experts and leaders in science and industry. The council is likely to communicate its findings to the public in the form of podcasts rather than just written reports, Moreno speculates.

"From the beginning, the President's Council on Bioethics found itself engulfed in conservative issues," says Thomas Murray,

president of the Hastings Center, a bioethics institute based in Garrison, New York and a member of Clinton's National Bioethics Advisory Committee from 1996 to 2001. Since the first presidential bioethics advisory group was convened, the issues deliberated have tended toward the controversial: clinical research ethics in the 1970s, definitions of death in the 1980s and gene patenting, cloning and stem cell research in the late 1990s.

The next Council might weigh in on a wide range of issues, including the types of research the government should fund, the role of information technology in healthcare, organ donation, the implications of personalized medicine and the treatment of patients in clinical trials.

Although some issues might be politically sensitive, Faden does not think they need to be politically divisive: "Part of the art form of the new commission will be finding issues that they can move on."

Vicki Brower, New York

Sequencing push brings new UK genome analysis center

Last month, DNA sequencing in the UK got a boost with the launch of the Genome Analysis Centre (TGAC) in the eastern city of Norwich. The £13.5 million (\$22 million) facility hosts biologists and bioinformaticians who will perform genome sequencing on plants, animals and microbes, as well as develop new bioinformatics tools for handling the data, which will be distributed via the European Bioinformatics Institute. In the future, TGAC will build commercial partnerships and offer doctoral and mid-career sequencing and bioinformatics training.

The center's opening on 3 July came amidst a flurry of announcements relating to high-throughput genome sequencing. In May 2009, the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) announced more than £7 million in new funding for high-throughput genome sequencing research scattered across nearly a dozen institutions in Britain. And, on 24 June, the MRC followed with another £2 million to, among other things, support researchers at Oxford University who are exploring mouse and human genetics and sequencing the DNA of pathogens.

The centre is run by the UK Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) as an independent nonprofit institution under the direction of Jane Rogers, former head of sequencing at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute near Cambridge, UK. But a fraction of its funding and some of its oversight comes from local city and county governments.



A new twist: Drug resistance will be examined

The likeliest discoveries at TGAC with direct medical applications will come from the center's research into drug-resistant microbes or advances in bioinformatics. The center's main remit is to apply genomic sequencing tools to agricultural applications, a major local industry.

"The genomic analysis of microbes will be a major focus, not only because they infect both animals and plants, but because they are already a source of drugs for the treatment of bacterial and fungal infections, and, therefore, they have the potential to provide new, superbug-beating antibiotics," Rogers said in a statement marking TGAC's launch.

The current TGAC staff of four contains just one computational biologist, though plans call for a total staff size of 20 by the end of this year and perhaps as many as 70 by around 2011 (including support and commercial development staff). In the immediate future, the center will focus on installing equipment, hiring staff and establishing collaborations with outside research groups.

Lucas Laursen, Cambridge, UK