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WHO steps closer to its responsibilities

Developments in biomedical research give rise to ethical dilemmas and public controversy around the world. New guidelines reflect the WHO's need to strengthen its role in helping governments and others address the issues.

"Hurried and premature legislation in the rapidly evolving field of genetics can be counterproductive. Legislation and guidelines should be based on a full and sound scientific and ethical assessment of the techniques concerned." Ironically, this sensible recommendation comes from draft bioethics guidelines being prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO) — the very agency that, in response to the cloning of Dolly the lamb in 1997, issued hasty comment that human reproductive cloning was "ethically unacceptable and contrary to human integrity and morality".

Worryingly, in endorsing this knee-jerk response, the WHO failed to provide enlightened discussion of the many complex issues raised by cloning, and instead meekly bowed to public and political pressure. Indeed, in its haste to please, the WHO assembly ignored the warning of its own working group on cloning: that the massive political riposte to Dolly smacked of "moral panic" rather than considered deliberation of the issues involved.

The authors of the draft WHO guidelines (see page 179), in an implicit disavowal of the WHO's superficial treatment of the issue, politely suggest that "elaboration of the ethical, scientific, social and legal considerations that are the basis of this call for the prohibition of reproductive cloning should continue". That such thinly veiled criticism should survive the agency's potent internal censoring procedures gives grounds for optimism that the WHO is now ready to play a more considered role in the international bioethics debate.

That is eminently desirable. Although both the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) and the Council of Europe have produced international texts on bioethics, the former principally addresses human-rights issues raised by advances in genetics, whereas the latter is inevitably restricted to one continent. Gro Harlem Brundtland's agency has no option but to position itself at the sharp end of public-health matters — and hence many of the issues raised by biomedical research.

The main motivation for the WHO setting in motion plans to adopt a role in bioethics was not so much a measured response to the real challenges as a political reaction to criticisms of the agency's unpreparedness to deal with issues such as cloning, and apparent envy over the lead on bioethics taken by that other UN agency, Unesco. The outcome, however, is remarkably comprehensive. Although the draft guidelines avoid ruling on areas such as the morality of human embryo research — where international consensus is, in any case, impossible — they do capture an accumulating consensus in the international community on certain fundamental principles that should govern biomedical research and its applications.

To those unaccustomed to the inevitable vagueness of international texts, it would be too easy to dismiss the guidelines as yet another list of good intentions. That would be a mistake; bioethics is ultimately an arena in which scientists, politicians and other members of society have to communicate and seek common ground.

Furthermore, while the guidelines' contents may seem obvious to many biomedical researchers, they are not so for many politicians and other lay persons. Many in developing countries, in particular, testify to the usefulness of such texts as a model to which their politicians and administrations can be referred in shaping legislation.

As an intergovernmental organization, with a hot line to health ministries throughout the world, the WHO has a duty to provide leadership in bioethics. It is also well placed to put in perspective concerns about perceived new threats to 'human dignity' with existing threats in the real world — such as the scandalously low funding of tropical-disease research.

But if the WHO is to play a serious role in bioethics, Brundtland will need to move further than guidelines. The agency will need the funds and the manpower to produce well-researched, forward-looking and credible input into the international debate on bioethics and public health. Meanwhile, the exercise of making the guidelines publicly available for wide comment (see http://helix.nature.com/wcs) is a valuable step towards greater openness. □

A commissioner for our time

Out of political mayhem, an opportunity for a visionary.

While it may be unseemly to dance on the political grave of the recently departed, it is permissible to welcome a vacancy for a replacement. As of Monday this week (15 March), Europe's research commissioner Edith Cresson was gone, together with her 19 fellow commissioners, following an independent inquiry. Although the launch of the fifth Framework programme of research has been achieved, major challenges remain.

Two stand out above all: the need to boost scientific education and skills across the continent — which inevitably necessitates increased support for basic research, however technology-orientated it is made to appear; and the need to enhance the technological flexibility of the continent as manifested in emerging companies, growing in the wake not only of Europe's giant success stories (Nokia, Ericsson, Glaxo-Wellcome, Siemens …), but also of inward investors and fundamental academic research.

Leadership comes not only from an understanding of the opportunities and priorities, but also from the imagination displayed in addressing them, and the enthusiasm with which this imagination can be conveyed. Many have good memories of the depth, vision and political reach of Etienne Davignon, who founded the precompetitive programmes such as ESPRIT in the early 1980s in a bid to reassert Europe's technological prowess in the face of revitalized US competition. Is it too much to hope that a similar individual can now be found? □