

# Transplant panel to play 'honest broker'

[PARIS] A small group of academics and health officials will meet in Canada in June to discuss new ways of generating public debate on the risks and benefits of the clinical application of xenotransplantation — the transplanting of animal cells, tissues and organs.

The meeting's organizers hope that this issue will serve as a testbed for the creation of an international think-tank covering ethics, science and governance.

The meeting at Meech Lake, Quebec, is the brainchild of Fritz Bach, a xenotransplant scientist at Harvard Medical School. Given the risk that xenotransplants may create pandemics, Bach has argued for a moratorium on clinical trials until there has been a public debate at the international level (see *Nature* 391, 320–325 & 326; 1998).

The meeting will be co-chaired by Strachan Donnelly of the Hastings Center in New York State and Farkhonda Hassan, a member of the Shoura Assembly (senate) of Egypt and professor of the science department at the University of Cairo. It will bring together more than a dozen xenotransplant experts, ethicists and non-governmental organizations, such as Pugwash.

Elizabeth MacGregor, former coordinator of the government's National Biotechnology Advisory Committee, has been responsible, along with Bach, for organizing the meeting.

"The meeting is expected to call for an international panel on xenotransplantation and the convening of a broad public consultation in liaison with national and international organizations to produce a detailed case study and international guidelines" says Bach.

"The choice of panel members will be crucial to its validity" he adds, arguing that it should include representatives of the various points of views on xenotransplantation, including the extreme views.

Xenotransplantation will serve as a test case for the organizers' more ambitious idea of creating a broader international think-tank. Discussions are at an early stage, but it has already attracted the interest of some prominent academics, including Keith Bezanon, director of the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Sussex, and Geoffrey Oldham, former director of the university's Science Policy Research Unit.

No name for the body has yet been decided, although it would be along the lines of The International Council on Science for Policy. The think-tank would identify other areas of technology where the risk-benefit equation is difficult to resolve, and would seek ways to better engage public debate and provide impartial information through setting up a series of working groups.

Bach sees the think-tank as a body free from political pressures, commercial inter-

ests and excessive scientific enthusiasm.

Abdullah Daar, from the Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, who will attend the Meech Lake meeting, believes there is a need to create such a body to break the excessively uniform thinking in many regulatory agencies and institutional ethics bodies. "National and professional organizations tend to mirror their perception of what the public ought to accept, rather than saying these things need to be thrashed out first," he says.

For the moment, the main outstanding questions are "the council's scope, how best to consult the public and who should choose its members" says Oldham. "We share a concern to find international approaches which genuinely involve developing countries, and a belief that these approaches must involve consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the public".

"Any mechanism that is devised must be complementary to what others are doing.

Hence our current concern is in identifying an appropriate niche." Oldham emphasizes that if the idea is to work it will require "major efforts to reach decision makers and to try to ensure that action follows".

Margaret Somerville, from the McGill Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law at McGill University, Montreal, welcomes the proposed think-tank. Existing ethics committees tend to be made up of representatives of various constituencies, she argues, so they often act as political bodies, with consensus being negotiated on the basis of "what do we do here to make a compromise to get the best deal for what we want to promote".

Somerville says there is a need for transnational structures, with no vested interests, that can put complex issues on the table, provide impartial information on their various aspects and solicit wide input, while being free from the pressure to reach an immediate consensus.

Declan Butler

## Looser ties urged for Japanese scientists

[TOKYO] Japan's trade minister, Kaoru Yosano, last week called for university scientists to be given more freedom to work in collaboration with industry. His comments were made in response to recent controversy over Sony's appointment of an economics professor from Hitotsubashi University to its board of directors.

Such external work is forbidden by civil service law, which prohibits employees of national universities from taking part in profit-making activities. But Yosano suggested that university researchers be given an exemption on the basis of "the potential benefit of collaboration between industry and the academic community".

The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (Monbusho) have been working towards relaxing the law (see *Nature* 390, 105; 1997), but little progress has yet been made.

The delay is partly due to concern that relaxing the law may trigger corrupt relationships between industry and universities. MITI officials attribute current sensitivity to a recent bribery scandal involving a former professor from Nagoya University and a major drug company (see *Nature* 396, 205; 1998).

Hirooyoshi Hidaka, a former professor at Nagoya University Medical School, and executives from Otsuka Pharmaceutical Co. were found guilty last week over payments relating to Otsuka's drug research and development activities.

It is said that Hidaka claimed to have received payments from Otsuka for



Kaoru Yosano: wants to relax current law.

providing 'technical consultation'. But the Nagoya District Prosecutor's Office ruled that the payments were bribes, on the basis that Hidaka accepted them in return for allowing the company to use university facilities, including researchers,

for commercial research — an activity that is also prohibited by the law.

While the public has been quick to express its disapproval, many researchers consider the incident to be no more than a conventional industry-university collaboration that was considered corrupt because of a lack of clear guidelines.

"It creates a terrible dilemma, as the government is actively urging university researchers to become involved in business activities, yet such involvement is restricted by the law," says Tamon Inoue, professor of engineering at Tsukuba University and head of its Venture Business Laboratory.

Akito Arima, minister of education and director-general of the Science and Technology Agency, is a supporter of such collaboration provided that activities are restricted to basic research.

But Arima said many questions still need to be addressed, such as those concerning how much researchers should be paid if they work for a private company, and also what their status would be if the company were to go bankrupt.

Asako Saegusa