

Who's playing God now?

Genetic manipulation is in for another bout of examination, even regulation, in the United States, but for the wrong reasons.

FUSS about genetic manipulation has not, after all, gone for good, at least in the United States. Just when people were coming to believe that the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC), set up a decade ago by the National Institutes of Health, had finally set public anxiety to rest and might itself ride off into the sunset, a new ruckus has broken out. This time the fellow hurtling the chair into the barroom mirror is one Jeremy Rifkin, a long-standing opponent of all genetic manipulation on environmental, economic, social, ethical and even religious grounds (see page 349). Rifkin first made his reputation in this field by disrupting a National Academy meeting on genetic manipulation in 1978 by means of a demonstration in which banners were unfurled equating recombinant DNA research with Nazi eugenics. Now, Rifkin has latched onto the convenient issues presented by proposals to release engineered organisms into the environment (see *Nature*, 2 September, p.262) and by the prospect that deliberate genetic modification of the human germ line may one day be possible. In quick succession, he has generated two lawsuits, an irate letter, a petition and a book which calls for a halt to all such activities. It will be easy to dismiss Rifkin as a rabble-rouser (which he is, or at least would like to be), but it would be mistaken to ignore the serious issues, questions of public safety and ethical dilemmas, underlying this spate of propaganda. Elsewhere, in Australia, Britain and France, for example, there are government committees brooding about the steps that should now be taken and not taken to regulate these activities, but in the United States the President's Commission on the subject has been abolished. Congressman Albert Gore's committee has taken evidence, and may report before too long, but in the meantime there is only RAC to meet whatever needs arise. How well does it fill the bill?

One of the most common complaints is that RAC is merely an advisory group whose decisions and guidelines are binding only on researchers dependent on federal funds. Indeed, RAC advises not the government as such but one of its agencies, the National Institutes of Health, which is not itself a regulatory agency. The result is that members of the public do not enjoy the right to challenge recommendations in the courts as they do in relation to other agencies, the Environmental Protection Agency for example. (Rifkin's lawsuit last week, which complains that RAC had neglected to file an environmental impact statement before sanctioning an experiment in which engineered bacteria would be released into the wild, is obviously flawed in this respect.) But although RAC's guidelines are not binding, the past decade has shown them to have been a powerful influence even on industrial companies simply because a corporation choosing to ignore RAC guidelines or neglecting to seek the committee's advice would be handing powerful and damaging ammunition to all those who might at some future time decide to sue it for damages. As things are, RAC is not merely the nearest entity in sight to a full-fledged regulatory agency, but is effective and acceptable as well.

A second common complaint against RAC is harder to deal with (but not necessarily valid for that reason). Rifkin, in last week's lawsuit, complains that the decision to approve of a small-scale release of engineered bacteria into the environment of northern California was taken by a committee devoid of ecologists. To be fair, RAC did consult outside experts in this field and also the Department of Agriculture's analogous committee, most

probably by now thoroughly imbued with the department's own deep suspicion of all plant infections. But with the shift there has been in the practical interests of the genetic manipulators, there may be a case for a more frequent, even more daring, review of RAC's membership. This does not, however, add up to the conclusion that RAC should be replaced by a *bona fide* regulatory agency of the US government. Explicit regulation would open a can of worms whose consequences RAC's critics seem not to have considered. This is why it is worrying that the Environmental Protection Agency is preparing to issue guidelines governing the general release of genetically engineered organisms on the grounds that recombinant DNA is a "new chemical substance" in the sense of the Toxic Substances Control Act. The agency has not yet disclosed whether it will thus begin to regulate hybrid corn and cross-bred cattle.

The genetic manipulation of human cells raises other difficulties, but fortunately there is time for them to be considered. The most obvious developments, the routine pre-determination of an offspring's sex (not strictly genetic manipulation but selection) and the correction of genetic defects in the somatic cells of people, will not be announced next week or next year (except perhaps in the *National Enquirer*). RAC is moving cautiously to increase its competence in fields such as these — there is talk of recruiting some members qualified to consider the subtle social and ethical problems certain to be posed by genetic manipulation applied to people, especially if germ-line cells are somehow involved. A case can be made for a federal monitoring role such as a strengthened RAC would enjoy. But once people are involved as individuals, it is best that there should be no uniform regulation of the ways in which they can and cannot be dealt with. In the future, as now, it will be necessary that patients themselves, their close relatives, their physicians and the institutions which employ the last should between them decide what should be done in the particular circumstances of each case. Outright bans would deny benefits to some. Uniform rules centrally imposed would invite precisely the threat of government eugenics programmes which the critics rightly say they fear most. □

Financing the poor

It is high time the US Congress put its full support behind IMF.

THE annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Washington this week is a little like a birthday party without the birthday gifts. The governments that constitute the membership of the fund must decide what rules should govern lending to governments in financial difficulties when the fund's resources are increased from the beginning of 1984. But the United States has so far failed to produce a promise that it will contribute to the planned enlargement of IMF's capacity to lend. The US administration — a late convert to the notion that extra funds are indeed essential — is willing, but Congress has not yet agreed to make the extra credit available. The international importance of the proposed enlargement of IMF's resources has been swamped in a mess of domestic politics, suggesting to the outside world that the United States has no effective mechanism for shouldering the