Learning from history

Sir — Your leading article advocating a moratorium on human cloning[1] places the Berg letter, advocating a moratorium on recombinant DNA research, in 1976, and states that it "was soon followed by strict regulation" — two serious inaccuracies. Given that we are still running the same debate, at least in Europe, a quarter of a century later, *Nature* should get it right.

A biohazards conference was held at Asilomar, California, in February 1973, and in June that year the annual Gordon Conference on nucleic acids, held in New Hampton, New Hampshire, was also devoted to hazards in rDNA research. The co-chairs of the latter meeting addressed a letter to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the Institute of Medicine, requesting the formation of a study committee to assess the hazards and recommend appropriate action[2]. NAS appointed Paul Berg to chair the resulting study committee; its report was published in *Nature* and *Science* in July 1974 (ref. 3). It called for voluntary deferment of certain experiments, pending further research; for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to establish an advisory committee to develop guidelines; and for an international meeting, which took place in February 1975 at Asilomar.

Donald Fredrickson, the director of NIH, established the NIH rDNA Advisory Committee immediately afterwards, its first guidelines being released in June 1976. These were mandatory for NIH-supported research, and followed voluntarily by others. Contemporary demands to legislate for "strict regulation" were finally seen as unnecessary in the congressional debates over the following months and years.

Again, the parallel debate in Europe was interesting: the strict containment directive proposed by the European Commission in 1978 was in 1980 replaced by what was adopted as Council Recommendation 82/472 in 1982, advocating national registration of such research, and regular review over subsequent years in the light of experience with the conjectural hazards — an admirably pragmatic approach, now sadly abandoned. The United Kingdom's responses in 1974–76 were similarly practical — the Ashby working party set up in the month of the Berg letter reported by December 1974 (ref. 4), in time to influence the debate at Asilomar; the Williams working party set up thereafter published guidelines in August 1976 (ref. 5), allowing research to recommence.

After ten more years of debate and experience, the council of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development could conclude "that there is no scientific basis for specific legislation to regulate the use of recombinant DNA organisms"[6].

All of which confirms the empirical observation that "those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it".

Mark Cantley
Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2 rue André Pascal, F-75775 Paris Cedex 16, France
e-mail: mark.cantley@oecd.org

1. *Nature* **386,** 1 (1997).
2. Singer, M. F. & Soll, D. *Science* **181,** 1114 (1973).
3. Berg, P. *et al. Nature* **250,** 175 (1974); *Science* **185,** 303 (1974).
4. *Report of the Working Party on the Experimental Manipulation of the Genetic Composition of Microorganisms* (Ashby Working Party), Cmnd. 5880 (HMSO, London, 1975).
5. *Report of the Working Party on the Practice of Genetic Manipulation* (Williams Working Party), Cmnd. 6600 (HMSO, London, 1976).
6. OECD Council recommendation adopted 16 July 1986, published in *Recombinant DNA Safety Considerations* (1986).

Deserving of trust

Sir — The News article "UCSF settles lawsuit over research costs" (*Nature* **385,** 377; 1997) raises the unfair implication that the Ischemia Research and Education Foundation (IREF) is a mere shell created and manipulated by Dr Dennis Mangano to

appropriate research funds.

In fact, IREF is a nonprofit public benefit corporation directly employing 60 people that works with more than 300 medical and scientific researchers participating in the Multicenter Study of Perioperative Ischemia (McSPI) Research Group in 160 clinical and research facilities worldwide. This unique organizational structure, in which hundreds of institutions and researchers share sensitive medical outcome information with an unbiased, independent nonprofit research facility, has made it possible for McSPI and IREF to overcome academic and competitive rivalries while accommodating legitimate concern about confidentiality to gather and analyse empirical data on a very large scale, with extraordinary results.

With the data and resources IREF has made available in the past three years alone, McSPI investigators have submitted more than 80 abstracts and manuscripts, including two recent lead articles in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (5 and 19 December 1996) and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (22 January 1997). One of these studies demonstrated that an inexpensive generic beta-blocker could supplant far more costly drugs being developed by the pharmaceutical industry and save more than 50,000 lives a year among patients undergoing complex surgery. Another IREF-sponsored epidemiological study showed that the risk of neurological damage following coronary artery bypass graft surgery was significantly higher than had previously been accepted in the medical community.

At a time when the cost and quality of medical care are of paramount concern, and when more than 30 million surgical procedures are performed annually in the United States alone, the public needs continued access to the results of our epidemiological studies. To continue this work without further distraction or expense, IREF decided to settle the lawsuit concerning the University of California, San Francisco. We have been and remain deserving of the public trust and the trust of the many scientific investigators participating in IREF's good works.

Ahvie Herskowitz
Ischemia Research and Education Foundation,
230 Executive Park Blvd, Suite 3400,
San Francisco, California 94134, USA

Unequal letters

Sir — Maybe I am missing something in the recent thread of letters about varying citation frequency depending on an author's alphabetical position. In case I am not, I should like to point out another possible explanation: there are more people with surnames starting with letters in the first half of the alphabet, hence the higher frequency of citations.

From looking at the telephone book for Hamburg, Germany, which is divided into two volumes, A–K and L–Z, it is obvious that names starting with the first eleven letters of the alphabet are more common than all the others, with the exception of 'S', which is the single most common first letter. Depending on differences in ethnic and national distributions of first letters in names, there should not be an even distribution of citations, even if all potential authors had an even chance of being first authors. Yet another explanation that has not been mentioned as far as I recall would be a preference of people whose names start with letters from the beginning of the alphabet for research — either by their own choice of career or through bias in hiring.

K. Thorsten Jaekel
Institut für Pathologie,
Universität Hamburg,
Martinistrasse 52,
20246 Hamburg, Germany
e-mail: jaekel@uke.uni-hamburg.de

● **When the London telephone directory was published in four equal parts (until a few years ago), the first section was A–D.**
— Editor, *Nature*.