

European Parliament rejects move to restrict genetics

Quirin Schiermeier, Munich

The European Parliament has ditched a report from one of its committees that would have called for tighter restrictions on genetics and biotechnology.

The action was welcomed by researchers and biotechnology companies, who opposed the report's recommendations and were concerned that the parliament might use its growing influence to restrain their work.

The report, prepared by a multiparty committee on human genetics and modern medicine, would have called for a ban on the cloning of human embryos for any purpose, and an end to the granting of gene patents. But on 29 November, the full parliament rejected the report by 316 votes to 37.

The 72-member committee's final report, produced after a year of expert hearings, was "very negative for science", admits Robert Goebbels, a Social Democrat from Luxemburg. Goebbels chaired the committee and was obliged to bring the report to the full parliament, even though he disagreed with it.

Last-minute attempts to make the report more pro-science failed to rescue it. In a turbulent session last Thursday, the parliament adopted 230 amendments introduced by various groups. But the result was riddled with contradictions and, says Goebbels, was "simply not good enough to be supported".

"It was not an hour of glory for the parliament," he says. But he notes that scientists will be relieved at the report's demise, and says that it's better to have no report than a bad report. "I am not happy that we spent 11 months without getting a decent result," he adds. "But there has been an evolution in the minds of many colleagues, who are now much better acquainted with the problems of modern biotechnology."

Conservatives were also unhappy at the report's failure. "It is a shame that no clear view could be adopted," says Peter Liese, a German Christian Democrat who strongly opposes cloning and human embryonic stem-cell research.

The European Parliament has already set out its stall on some biomedical research issues in its proposal for the next European Union (EU) Framework programme for research. That document said that EU funding should be used for stem-cell research, but that no human embryos should be cloned for research purposes (see *Nature* 414, 386; 2001). ■

Rescuers of Europe's cultural heritage struggle for funding



Unalloyed success: new shape-memory alloys helped rebuild the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi.

Alison Abbott, Munich

Scientists who work to conserve historic buildings, monuments and archaeological remains face an uphill struggle to secure continued funding from the European Union — despite their considerable success.

Research on the conservation of cultural heritage, which has been funded for the past 15 years by the European Commission, has been an outstanding model of effective technology transfer, says a report. The study, which was prepared by the European Parliament's Scientific and Technological Options Assessment unit (STOA), adds that Europe leads the world in this research area.

But the report notes that such research is likely to be excluded from the European Union's next Framework research programme (FP6), which starts in 2003.

May Cassar, director of the Centre for Historic Buildings, Collections and Sites at University College London, who helped to prepare the report, says that FP6's emphasis on large grants of up to 10 million euros (US\$8.9 million) will exclude cultural heritage networks, which require more modest funding. "It is crazy to abandon research at this point when it is starting to bear fruit, and when we are the envy of our colleagues in Asia and the Americas," she says.

The report's authors ask the commission to add a special funding line to FP6 for developing technological solutions for the conservation and protection of cultural heritage. There are no other sources of international funding for this work, they point out.

The FP6 is not yet set in stone — its final shape will be agreed next year by the commission, the parliament and the European Council, which is made up of representatives of the European Union's member govern-

ments. Although the parliament has proposed amendments that would include cultural heritage in FP6, the commission is not in favour of the change.

A spokeswoman for research commissioner Philippe Busquin says the present text of the Framework programme is "not a vote against cultural heritage". That cannot be a priority, she says, "but it will find its place in other specific FP6 programmes such as nanotechnology where new materials may prove advantageous for restoration work."

Since the European Union began funding research into the protection of cultural heritage, many different problems have been approached by interdisciplinary teams, often making use of materials and techniques originally developed for other purposes.

One project adapted a 'shape-memory alloy', a highly elastic nickel-titanium alloy used in industrial and dentistry applications, to stabilize the structure of historic monuments in earthquake-prone areas. The project, begun in 1996, proved timely: the alloys were used in the reconstruction of the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, Italy, after it was badly damaged by an earthquake in 1997.

Technology transfer has worked in both directions, says Cristina Sabbioni, an atmospheric physicist at the CNR Institute for Atmospheric and Oceanic Science in Bologna and a STOA committee member. For example, a new species of antibiotic-producing bacterium was discovered by an international team looking at the effects of mass tourism on prehistoric rock art in the Altamira caves in northern Spain. The Hans Knöll Institute for Natural Products in Jena, Germany, has patented the novel antibiotic, which it has named altamiramycin. ■

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