



BLUEPRINT FOR A BACTERIUM
How *Mycoplasma pneumoniae* does a lot with very little
go.nature.com/woue6a

D. KUNKEL/PHOTOLIBRARY

US bioethics commission promises policy action

Five months after abruptly dismantling the bioethics advisory council left by his predecessor, US President Barack Obama last week created a new bioethics commission that will move beyond the issues that consumed previous panels, such as stem cells and cloning. Based within the Department of Health and Human Services, the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues is explicitly charged with recommending legislative and regulatory action and promises to have more influence on policy.

Bioethical, social and legal questions relating to genomics and behavioural research are all on the commission's agenda. So are issues of intellectual property, scientific integrity and conflicts of interest in research.

The contrast with the previous bioethics council established by President George W. Bush is stark. Bioethicist George Annas of Boston University, Massachusetts, has described that council, which existed in two incarnations, as having a "narrow, embryo-centric agenda", focusing largely on the research implications of questions such as the moral status of the embryo and when life begins (see *Nature* 431, 19–20; 2004).

In another break with the past, Obama has chosen not to appoint bioethicists to lead the commission. Instead, it will be chaired by political theorist Amy Gutmann, president of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and its vice-chair will be materials scientist James Wagner, president of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Gutmann's work deals with deliberative democracy, and using reasoned argument to depolarize politics. Wagner served at the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Devices and Radiological Health for a decade, and now, as Emory's president, stresses that ethical engagement is integral to the university's strategic vision.

"The appointments of Gutmann and

Wagner reinforce the expectation that this commission will seek to provide practical, actionable guidance to the administration and the country," says Ruth Faden, executive director of the Berman Institute of Bioethics at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. "This is a wise way to structure the leadership of the commission."

The remaining members of the 13-strong commission are expected



Amy Gutmann is to head the US bioethics commission.

to include bioethicists specializing in medicine and law, along with experts chosen from the fields of science, engineering, theology and philosophy. Between one and three of those members will be appointed from the government's executive branch. "These appointments, and the council's place in the executive branch of the government, suggests that

it will be more than just a talking shop, with perhaps a significant influence over practice," says political theorist Michael Gottsegen of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

Annas believes that the commission may not be sufficiently independent of government. "Bioethics advisory commissions should be totally free-standing, and not linked to the government and presidential terms, in order to avoid doing 'Republican' or 'Democratic' bioethics," he says.

The commission's wider scope will also force some tough choices in deciding priorities, says Annas. "Doctors' [involvement in] force-feeding prisoners at Guantanamo, doctors and torture, and international human-research rules are pressing issues of our day which demand our attention," he says. Among the other issues he thinks the commission should juggle are new reproductive technologies, an overhaul of informed-consent procedures and — perhaps most immediate — fairer ways to apportion health care.

Vicki Brower

British medical research chief quits midterm

The early departure of the head of Britain's Medical Research Council (MRC) has prompted concern for the future of the funding body.

Leszek Borysiewicz announced on 26 November that he will quit as chief executive of the MRC on 1 October 2010 — a year before his four-year term was due to expire — to become vice-chancellor at the University of Cambridge, UK. "It's a thrilling and exciting opportunity for me and one I feel I couldn't resist," says the 58-year-old.

The appointment has generally drawn acclaim for Borysiewicz from Britain's biomedical establishment. Richard Henderson, a researcher at the Cambridge-based MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology who also sits on the MRC Council, believes that Borysiewicz's background and his political acumen will serve him well in his new role.

But for some, there is also anxiety over the future of the MRC. "I think that Borys has done an excellent job," says Colin Blakemore, a neuroscientist at the University of Oxford, UK, and Borysiewicz's predecessor at the MRC. But Blakemore adds that he is "deeply worried about what this might mean for the MRC, especially for the support of basic biomedical research".

Borysiewicz has overseen a major increase in spending, managing a budget that reached £704.2 million (US\$1.2 billion) this year. His scientific background, a mix of basic and applied bioscience, has been credited with helping the MRC to increase its emphasis on translational medicine without losing its strength in basic research.

But the future seems less clear. Some believe that the UK government's Department of Health may seek a larger stake in the MRC, pushing it further towards biomedical research and away from fundamental science. There are even worries that the MRC may be absorbed in the Department of Health, or broken up.

With a general election looming next summer, Borysiewicz's departure "could make the MRC vulnerable at a very critical time", says Blakemore. "It will need a strong new leader, respected by both basic and clinical researchers."

But Borysiewicz says he sees little cause for concern. "The MRC is stronger now than it has been for a very long time," he says.

Geoff Brumfiel