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German bioethics inquiry 'could hold up essential rule changes'

Munich

In contrast to their pre-election promise, the Social Democrats (SPD) in the German parliament have declared their opposition to an all-parliamentary commission of inquiry on human rights and bioethics.

They argue that such a '*commission d'enquête*', on whose creation parliament is due to vote next week, could delay the introduction of rules and legislation in the fields of biomedicine by producing lengthy debate on principles that have already been agreed.

Their position is strongly supported by the Christian Democrat opposition. But the Greens — the SPD's junior coalition partner — complain that refusing to set up the promised commission would be shirking a democratic responsibility.

"Advances in pre-implantation diagnostics and reproductive medicine are likely to shatter our traditional ideas of human nature," says Monika Knoche, the Green parliamentary group's expert on medical ethics. "A democratic parliament has an obligation to take up such issues."

Parliamentary *commissions d'enquête*, intended to provide broad advice to politicians, are set up only on issues with major impact on society, such as climate change, economic globalization or the consequences of demographic changes. They comprise members of all political parties, as well as representatives of relevant social groups.

But their work can be lengthy and time-consuming, and sometimes a final report, as occurred with that on technology assessment (*Technikfolgenabschätzung*), cannot be reached within a four-year legislation period. The wide range of topics discussed, and the conflicting perspectives of groups and individuals involved, makes compromise difficult to achieve.

Some argue that this makes *commissions d'enquête* a useful way of postponing political action, such as legislation. Furthermore, given the country's Nazi past, medical ethics issues are already highly sensitive in Germany, and its legislation is the strictest in Europe (*Nature* **389,** 660; 1997 & **384,** 5; 1996).

Germany is still hesitating, for example, over whether to sign and ratify the Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine. It fears that its own laws, although not directly in conflict with the convention, could eventually be watered down by its less restrictive provisions.

For many Germans, the convention's main bone of contention is a clause allowing research on 'legally incapacitated' persons where there is no alternative means of doing the research.

Such research is forbidden in Germany under the Nuremberg codex of physicians. However, it is being carried out in what experts describe as a legal 'grey area' — for example, clinical research on oxygen supply during birth complications, with the consent of the babies' parents alone.

Ironically, the SPD's refusal to set up a *commission d'enquête* on bioethics reflects the party's attempt to prevent similar grey areas arising in other areas of biomedicine, such as germline therapy, genetic testing, reproduction medicine, organ transplantation or the cloning of stem cells.

"We should spend our time taking legislative initiatives where they are needed, rather than engaging in a cumbersome debate about principles," says Wolf-Michael Catenhusen, the SPD's parliamentary state secretary in the Ministry of Research.

Catenhusen favours signing the Council of Europe convention. The convention's supplementary agreements on organ transplantation, embryo research, human genetics and medical research are now being discussed by the council's bioethics steering committee. Germany is involved in the discussions, but Catenhusen is worried about what may come out of these.

So far, the convention, approved by the ▶

'It's a G': the one-billionth nucleotide

Washington & Cambridge

Champagne corks were popping on both sides of the Atlantic on Tuesday (23 November) when participants in the Human Genome Project celebrated the successful sequencing of the one-billionth base pair of human DNA.

The landmark means that researchers are approximately one third of the way towards the full sequence of about three billion nucleotides, which is due to be completed next spring. According to officials at the Wellcome Trust in London, the one-billionth nucleotide, reached on 17 November, was a 'G' (guanine).

At a ceremony at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, Donna Shalala, the US Secretary for Health and Human Services, handed certificates to representatives of the main US sequencing centres, each of which was linked by video to the award ceremony. Shalala paid tribute to "the brilliance, dedication and ingenuity of hundreds of scientists throughout the world. They've been doing this quietly, but at an astonishing pace, and their work promises to fuel unprecedented scientific and medical advances."

Sulston: received award for work on genome.

WELLCOME TRUST

Francis Collins, director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, which is supporting the US part of the project with the energy department, praised participants for keeping costs down and quality up.

Britain's science minister, David Sainsbury, told a simultaneous celebration at the Sanger Centre outside Cambridge, where one third of the sequencing is being carried out, that the speed and skill with which the one-billionth pair had been reached was "a remarkable achievement". Earlier in the day, Sainsbury presented an award to John Sulston, the director of the Sanger Centre. **David Dickson & Colin Macilwain**

council in 1997, has been signed by 28 of the council's 40 member states. Five countries — Denmark, Greece, San Marino, Slovakia and Slovenia — have ratified it, and Spain will join them in January.

Germany and Britain are the only large European countries not to have signed. "I feel that Germany should not be the last to sign," says Catenhusen. "Otherwise we risk being excluded from the discussion process in Europe."

Catenhusen: 'sign European convention'.

The Greens, at their last party conference, unanimously voted against the convention. They fear it could undermine German standards, bringing them down to the levels of some neighbouring countries such as Belgium, where, for example, there are no laws on embryo research.

But some members, such as Jens Reich, a bioinformaticist at the Max-Delbrück Centre for Molecular Medicine in Berlin and the Greens' 1994 candidate for federal president, argue more pragmatically that, despite its weaknesses, the convention should be signed as it sets minimal standards throughout Europe.

Ludger Honnefelder, director of the Institute of Science and Ethics at the University of Bonn, is a member of the German delegation in the Council of Europe's steering committee on bioethics. He firmly believes that Germany's accession to the convention would "significantly increase its international influence".

Despite the dispute about a *commission d'enquête*, there is general agreement in Germany on the need for continuous bioethical advice and monitoring. Catenhusen suggests that a national ethics commission, similar to Britain's Nuffield Council on Bioethics, should be established.

Werner Lensing, the Christian Democrat spokesman on bioethics in the parliamentary committee on research, agrees that ad hoc expert panels, which are used by the Nuffield council, would be effective. Just such an advisory panel, on the ethical implications of predictive genetic testing and reproductive medicine, was set up last week by the federal health ministry.

But Knoche insists that only a commission d'enquête would have the political weight appropriate to the scope of the issues in question: "Such a body is indispensable. And we would certainly not use it as a blocking tool." **Quirin Schiermeier**

Israel urged to set up labs to carry out military research

Jerusalem

Government laboratories should be set up in Israel to carry out defence research, according to a report on revitalizing the country's military industries. Weapons development and production, it adds, should be carried out by private companies, rather than government corporations as at present.

The report was drawn up by a defence ministry committee headed by reserve general Moshe Peled. It recommends that Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI), Israel Military Industries, and Raphael (the Armament Development Authority), an auxiliary unit of the defence ministry, should be privatized.

But it adds that the research underpinning weapons development should be performed by a new system of government research laboratories.

As the report is classified, Peled is refusing to comment on it. But Yossi Snir, the committee's coordinator, says a summary that appeared in the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* last week is "reliable".

In recent years, Israel's defence industries have been plagued by falling sales, labour disputes over forced redundancies, and a lack of technological innovation. According to *Ha'aretz*, one problem is the difficulty of attracting highly qualified young scientists.

"Since the 1990s [the trend] is for talented people to leave government research laboratories and move to the flourishing private high-tech industry," confirms Zehev Tadmor, former president of the Technion, Israel's institute of technology.

There has been a mixed reaction to the proposal to create government defence laboratories, which do not currently exist in Israel. "I'm not sure that we have to separate out basic research," says Moshe Arens, former defence minister and former IAI deputy director-general. Privatizing the industries would be sufficient to make them more attractive to young scientists, he suggests.

But physicist and former minister of science and technology Yuval Ne'eman says the establishment of such laboratories would be a positive development, not only for defence industries but for Israeli science in general.

"Since nearly all research is performed at the universities, a tradition has become established according to which the amount of research performed in the country is tied to [its] number of students," Ne'eman complains. Government laboratories of the kind that exist in the United States and Europe could break the link between higher education and research budgets, he says.

The Peled report also calls for a reversal of the long decline in government investment in basic research. **Haim Watzman**

Concern at cheap AIDS drug fears

Cape Town

Officials of a US foundation that has raised $1 million to prevent paediatric AIDS in Africa are expressing concern at a statement from the health ministers of Southern African countries raising questions about the use of the anti-retroviral agent AZT and the cheaper alternative nevirapine.

The California-based Elizabeth Glaser Paediatric Trust has earmarked $1 million for paediatric AIDS prevention in Africa using nevirapine, which is less expensive than AZT and simpler to administer. A single dose to mothers at the onset of labour, and a single dose to the baby in its first three days of life, cost less than $4 per treatment.

But this initiative could suffer as the result of a joint statement issued by the health ministers of South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, Angola and Rwanda at a meeting in Johannesburg this month held to discuss a coordinated response on HIV/AIDS.

The ministers acknowledged that administering either drug can approximately halve the numbers of HIV-positive children born to mothers who are HIV positive.

But they expressed "grave concern over possible side effects as a result of their toxicity and the potential development of resistance to these compounds". They felt it was necessary to research the effects of "unnecessary exposure of children and mothers to these drugs".

This action is understood to have been heavily influenced by the South African government's position (see *Nature* 402, 225; 1999). In South Africa, 22 per cent of women attending antenatal clinics, and seven per cent of new babies, are HIV infected.

Both AZT and the oral form of nevirapine are registered with South Africa's Medicines Control Council. But it is understood that the suspension form of nevirapine, which is administered to infants, has not yet been submitted to the council for registration. **Michael Cherry**