

CORRESPONDENCE

THE 'PUBLIC DEBATE' DILEMMA

To the editor:

I am apprehensive about future "public debate" between the biotechnology industry and activist foes. At the moment, the primary beneficiary of broad public debate is likely to be the activist community.

Germane scientific, ethical, and regulatory issues are presently being discussed in well-structured public forums and hearings. Should debate expand and move to radio and TV, however, I doubt that this civil atmosphere will be maintained. From the activist viewpoint, there is much to gain by lowering the tone of the debate.

Biotechnology products offer excellent risk:benefit ratios. But the man in the street doesn't like risk: benefit ratios; he like zero risk. The public at large has much less interest in pseudorabies vaccines, frost-free bacteria, and developmental guidelines than it has in deadly plagues, genetic mutants run amok, and people in test tubes. In this climate, specious arguments designed to raise opposition to biotechnology are likely to be accepted by a significant portion of the public.

Anti-biotechnology arguments are simple to state and easy for the public to understand. Their rebuttals are harder for the public to understand, and the broadcast media do not permit detailed explanations. Imagine appearing on a TV program and trying to give quick, effective responses to the following charges, raised or implied by Nachama Wilker and Seth Shulman in their article "Who is Protecting the Public's Health?" (*Bio/Technology* 4:824, Sept. '86):

- The hazardous waste problem was caused by some of the companies involved in biotechnology today.
- Environmental release of genetically altered organisms is comparable to the introductions of the gypsy moth and the citrus canker.
- Vaccines may recombine in inoculated animals, generating deadly new viruses.
- The \$3-billion biotechnology industry places products and profits ahead of public safety, because companies won't disclose their proprietary processes to the public.

Should large numbers of the public

decide to believe such arguments, it will become immaterial who is scientifically right. The court of public opinion is a kangaroo court. A worried public often demands onerous policies without all the relevant facts, as the nuclear power industry and AIDS patients have discovered.

Radio and TV confrontations will be unavoidable. Refusing to appear is tantamount to admission of wrongdoing, and charges must be answered even if only one listener in ten absorbs the answers. With this in mind, can the industry get a fair hearing in the media? In the long run, can it overcome delaying tactics, oppressive regulation, and a public that is willing to shut companies down?

The answer is yes, if the public understands the whole truth. The industry must get the positive news about biologically engineered products to the general public, presumably via an industry-sponsored information program. Such a program should consist of clear, truthful articles, publications, and advertising in the mass media. The benefits of this industry's products are potentially enormous—better agriculture, better medicine, better health. Once the public understands the potential benefits of the products versus their unlikely risks, it will want the products.

This industry must begin to tell its side of the story soon. Delay will concede the expanding "public debate" to people who want to stop biotechnology in its tracks.

Peter Fink
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CONTRACT CORRECTION

To the editor:

I am writing to correct a statement in the article "Contract Production: Buying Technical Expertise" (*Bio/Technology* 4:701, Aug. '86). The article stated, "Genex (Gaithersburg, MD) has also developed a proprietary expression system. Unlike Repligen and Phillips, however, Genex does not license its technology."

On the contrary, Genex does license its technology related to microbial expression systems. In fact, tech-

nology licensing is an important part of Genex's business in two ways.

1. One of Genex's main objectives is to license proprietary technology to companies with complementary resources—financial, marketing, and/or technical—to bring the related products to market. For example, Genex is seeking a corporate partner for commercializing its alkaline proteases for use in laundry detergents.

2. Genex typically structures research contracts so that the customer receives a license for defined uses of any invention or know-how developed under such contracts.

Lee H. Gough
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ERRATA

The roundtable on agricultural biotechnology (Feb. 1987, p. 130) incorrectly stated that Ciba-Geigy's atrazine herbicide has been banned in Canada.

The article on bispecific monoclonal antibodies (March 1987, p. 196) jumped the gun when it reported that Quest Biotechnology has purchased American Monitor Corp. Quest points out in a subsequent press release that it only *plans* to acquire the bankrupt blood-testing equipment firm.

Due to an editing error, some ambiguity crept into one passage of "From R&D to Production: Designing a Chromatographic Purification Scheme" by Gail Sofer and Charles Mason (March '87). It should be made clear that, even if sample runs themselves require slow flow, a high-flow-rate chromatographic medium can greatly speed the processes of cleaning and re-equilibration.