

have a statistically higher chance of developing a tumor in the second breast.

The problems of testing were underscored at the meeting by the release of a white paper on breast cancer gene testing from Stanford University's Program in Genomics, Ethics and Society. The result of a year's work by a group that included physicians, basic scientists, breast cancer activists, social scientists, genetic counselors, law professors, journalists and others, the white paper echoed many of the same concerns raised by ELSI's Task Force on Genetic Testing, but outlined more specifically issues raised by *BRCA1/2* testing. Summarizing the paper, Henry Greely, the group's chair and a professor of health law at Stanford, stressed that the effects of this testing are complicated, with both positive and negative fallout for individuals and their families, and that testing should be offered and taken only with great care. "Proceed, but with caution, was the group's sentiment," he said, pointing out that some members emphasized "proceed," while others stressed "caution." Echoing the widely held sentiment that testing should be done only for those in high risk groups, the Stanford paper stated that testing should not therefore be prohibited for those not considered high-risk. But it did say that testing without counseling is inappropriate, and must include follow-up care.

As testing has moved from tightly managed research settings to wide commercial availability, research has begun to study the effects of testing on women who do not receive any or adequate counseling. "One problem we've uncovered so far is that many women don't really understand the weaknesses of the tests, and aren't able to articulate that a negative result does not mean she has no cancer risk," said Pamela Sankar, a medical anthropologist at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Bioethics at the Fox Chase Cancer Center in Philadelphia, PA.

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UK xeno guidelines

The British government announced as this issue went to press that it intends to cover xenotransplantation — the use of animal tissue in human surgery — and will set up an 'interim' regulatory authority to oversee research in the field until the legislation has passed by Parliament. Both decisions were made in response to the report of an advisory group on the ethics of xenotransplantation (*Nature Med.* 2, 378).

Clash of ethics ties up Italian legislation

Last year's statement by Pope John Paul backing Darwin's theory of evolution has served to focus attention on the fact that despite this apparent coming together of science and religion, there are still considerable gaps between medical science and Roman Catholicism on other matters. Unlike the gradual acceptance of evolution, on other issues there doesn't appear to be any compromise by either side in the near future; in fact, the continued acrimony is not only a philosophical debate, but is hampering the development of legislation on important matters, such as *in vitro* fertilization and human embryo transfer, legislation that is needed to bring Italy into step with the European community.

Italy must soon have laws in place that address the Council of Europe's recent approval of an international convention permitting experimentation on human embryos. However, the Italian government body charged with developing such legislation, the Italian National Bioethics Committee (CNB), finds itself in the situation of trying to find a compromise between two influential and mutually exclusive schools of thought unwilling to compromise with each other.

The conflict is most apparent in the recent publication of the *Manifesto di Bioetica Laica* (Manifesto of lay bioethics) by Italy's leading economic newspaper, *Il Sole 24 Ore*. The Manifesto has subsequently been debated publicly and loudly. Some observers believe that it is simply an attempt by leftist thinkers to influence the CNB directly. But leftist politicians claim the CNB only embraces values in harmony with the Roman Catholic moral tradition. Now that a more leftist government is in charge, lay ethicists hope to strengthen their influence in designing the needed legislation. They point out that, despite Roman Catholic attempts to ban such procedures, *in vitro* fertilization is commonly practiced despite a lack of legislation. And, they say, even human embryo research is also being conducted.

Francesco D'Agostino, the president of CNB, is trying to find some common ground on which to bring the two sides together. But it is a difficult task at best. For example, the authors of the Manifesto say it was created precisely for the purpose of finding compromise, but few others believe that. "They definitely needn't have used the word 'lay', as it is misleading and relegates any moral commitment of [Roman] Catholics to irrational and factious princi-

ples," says D'Agostino. The authors of the Manifesto do admit that in Italy's cultural environment the term 'lay' has a polemic flavor, but their intention was to contrast the lay vision to what they believe to be the dogmatic elements of religious thought. Indeed, they claim that the Manifesto embraces values — such as individual autonomy and freedom of research — that should be shared by everyone.

The impasse is over such matter as human embryo research. Members of CNB who subscribe to Roman Catholic teachings claim that "on the basis of incontrovertible biological evidence" the embryo is a human being, and consequently all research must be banned. Lay ethicists argue that research should be allowed on embryos because they are not human beings. D'Agostino, trying to find common ground, suggests that research should be allowed on embryos that are "altered" and thus not able to be successfully implanted. This position is not acceptable to either side.

The thorny issues around *in vitro* fertilization also have the CNB trying to mediate a compromise. According to a recent proposal by D'Agostino, heterologous fertilization (gametes from donors) would be allowed if consent were limited to married couples. But Roman Catholic ethicists demand that only homologous fertilization be allowed, that is only gametes from married couples, while lay ethicists are unwilling to accept the limitation of marriage even on heterologous *in vitro* fertilization.

The Italian Parliament has avoided any serious discussion about specific laws related to these issues, although the Minister of Health Rosy Bindi has publicly called the lack of Italian legislation a "shame" when compared with the efforts made by other European countries, such as the United Kingdom and Germany.

Is there hope of progress on these points of contention? "At the moment, my expectations are rather pessimistic," says D'Agostino. He says that scientists need to be more open to the "concerns of theology and faith," just as theologians "learned to accept — at a high price beginning from Galileo — the autonomy of science." But in Italy's current ethical environment, despite the Pope's explicit calls for more tolerance and solidarity from both sides, the chasm separating the two sides appears to be unbridgeable, and necessary laws a distant reality.

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