

Genetics research on the town hall agenda, courtesy of ELSI

As in some other US States, the citizens of Vermont gather in town halls each Spring to hold meetings. Grievances are aired, issues debated and local laws enacted at the gatherings. However, a new program at the University of Vermont is hoping to add another item to the agenda this year—genetics research.

With funding provided by the Ethical, Legal and Social Implications (ELSI) program at the US National Human Genome Research Institute, University of Vermont researchers are organizing a series of retreats and town meetings to discuss the impact of new discoveries in areas like biotechnology and genetic testing. "It's very important to get a broad view of what people in the real world would like to get from the new genetic technology," explains Rod Howell, chairman of pediatrics at the University of Miami and an advisor to ELSI. The meetings, Howell explains, will serve as an educational forum for scientists and the public to discuss "what genetics can do, what genetics can't do and what would folks like to know."

The program will begin this month with a series of retreats aimed at specific groups

of professionals. "[The focus of each retreat] will be slightly different for the different groups. How does the media handle all this information to make it useful to the public? How will this new genetics change our health care? How will this change the way we view ourselves and each other?" are among the issues to be raised according to Alan Guttmacher, a medical geneticist at the University of Vermont College of Medicine and director of the project.

After the retreats, panel discussions will be held in towns around the state to catalyze further discussion among citizens. "It's not as if we have answers to any of these questions, we just want to get people thinking about them," explains Guttmacher. Elizabeth Thomson, Director of Research at ELSI, agrees: "basically what it prepares people to do is participate in debates about these issues."

However, town meetings are traditional venues for formulating policies, so is it possible that regulations covering biomedical research could be enacted at the local, rather than Federal level? While not a primary goal of the current series of meetings, such grass roots efforts may arise. "In some situations it is probably appropriate to have

national policies, but in other cases it is perfectly reasonable to have local or state or regional policies on these issues," says Thomson. She points to laws already enacted in several states to limit genetic testing and ensure patient confidentiality as examples of successful local legislation, but stops short of endorsing state laws that might inhibit Federally-funded research. Howell points out that Dolly was followed by "a spate of bills that popped up all over the country about cloning and if you were not completely lucid in your understanding, you could potentially prohibit cloning, which would affect research."

There are no immediate plans to expand the program, although both ELSI and the University regard that as a possibility. The program will be assessed qualitatively, based on the participants' feedback and an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of informing the public about these issues. Vermont can be considered as somewhat different from other states—it has a small, highly educated and progressive population—and it is likely that the program would have to be adapted if it were used elsewhere.

ALAN DOVE, NEW YORK

Funding for Gallo Institute under threat

Robert Gallo's Maryland-based HIV research institute may be facing a funding shortage. State senators voted last month on whether to continue financing the Institute for Human Virology, or stick to the original agreement under which state support for the group expired after three years. Under the original deal, funding was due to end on June 30th 1998.

As of April 13th, the Maryland legislature looked likely to approve an additional \$1.5 million for FY98 and \$4.5 million for FY99, according to the Institute's chief operating officer, Mike Goldrich. However, the Institute will not receive \$1 million of the FY99 money unless it submits a "strategic and business plan" by October 1, 1998 through the University Board of Regents. Maryland governor Parris Glendening (Dem), has requested five years funding beginning in FY00, but it is not clear whether the legislature will agree to this.

Gallo, who set up the Institute after leaving the National Cancer Institute where he

had worked for 30 years, fully expected the funding to continue. "There is a perception that the Institute is some freestanding facility," Gallo told *Nature Medicine*, "it is actually part of the University of Maryland, and as such is entitled to state money." He says that the threat to withdraw funding was based on misunderstandings and politics. "I don't think there was anything here that was punitive," he says.



Robert Gallo

Gallo maintains that there have been no questions as to the Institute's performance or return on investment in terms of value to the community. The Institute, he points out, has teaching and community programs, has brought in new scientists and grants—\$6 million in awards for FY98 and \$6.4 million in pending applications. But although the Institute is winning its share of grant money, it requires base funding, insists Gallo: "if the state pulled out we would have been left with no hard money." And that funding is crucial to attracting talent and doing basic research, he adds.

Although the Institute also treats patients at its clinic, it receives no clinical revenue and has not had its indirect costs covered by the University or hospital, says Gallo.

He allegedly chose Baltimore as the location for the new Institute after being lured by offers of \$1 million from the city and around \$50 million from the state. From the outset, he was sanguine about the Institute's future, envisioning a staff of 500, a West Coast sister location and a jointly-held corporation to commercialize discoveries. But records show that so far he's brought on only about 135 employees, and the biotech partnership is still being negotiated. As far as a second location, there's no inkling that it's in the works, says Goldrich.

So are taxpayers getting anything in return? "We'd be happy to show how much we're doing for that basal level," says Gallo. The Institute has been issued with 20 patents and has been awarded 57 percent of the grants applied for. In his usual inimitable fashion, Gallo added, "I doubt any other Institute has had as productive and rapid a takeoff as we have. And it's going to get better, I promise you."

ALICIA AULT, WASHINGTON, D.C.