Cloning report examined by Parliament

Australian scientists are uneasy with the fact that backbench members of parliament (MPs) are to pore over a report by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) that recommends a ban on reproductive but not on therapeutic cloning. This political attention is reminiscent of that in the US, where such pressure delayed a National Bioethics Advisory Commission report (<http://medicine.nature.com/breaking-news/>), and in the UK (*Nature Med.* 5, 855; 1999). This means that the NHMRC will now have to defend its own report to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs.

Pressure from conservative government MPs is believed to be behind Australian Health Minister Michael Wooldridge's decision to order a review of the findings. Therapeutic cloning advocate Julian Savulescu from the University of Melbourne's Murdoch Institute warns, "It would be an enormous tragedy, not just for science but for all of us, if legislation was passed prohibiting the development of these technologies for the treatment of human disease."

The parliamentary committee is chaired by Kevin Andrews, a social conservative catholic MP, who is best known for introducing a private member's bill that negated a territory law permitting euthanasia. Andrews is a former medical ethics lawyer and is a prominent member of the 'pro-family' lobby within the governing Liberal Party.

Although the NHMRC is constituted as Australia's health advisory body to the government, these events are adding to concern that it is no longer being allowed to set the agenda on many health issues.

RADA ROUSE, BRISBANE

Scientist denies role in conflict investigation

A 4 September article in the *Los Angeles Times* implying that a federal investigation at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has been expanded to target a second researcher has surprised both the researcher and NIH staffers. "I've been called by NIH and told that there is no investigation whatsoever," Jerrold Olefsky, the scientist in question, told *Nature Medicine*.

Olefsky, professor of medicine at the University of California, San Diego and

president of the Californian biotechnology company, Metabolex, claims the story—also reported in the 9 September issue of *Nature*—is a misunderstanding.

The Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Health and Human Services is now investigating allegations that NIH researcher Richard Eastman may have violated conflict of interest rules during clinical trials of the diabetes drug Rezulin (*Nature Med.* 5, 129; 1999). In the course of that investigation, NIH officials forwarded documents related to patents held by Olefsky to the inspector general. NIH spokesperson Ann Thomas stresses that there is no investigation of Olefsky, although she admits, "We do not know whether the Inspector General is going to look into [these documents] or not." Olefsky says he holds one patent relevant to the Rezulin trial, and that NIH officials analyzed this before his involvement in the study and determined that it posed no conflict.

Officials declined to comment on the Eastman investigation, but conceded that the publicity surrounding that inquiry was the impetus behind a conflict-of-interest workshop held this summer at the NIH's Bethesda campus.

ALAN DOVE, NEW YORK

Court compensates over activist delay

Primate trials at the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) in Hyderabad, India, which were interrupted by animal rights activists in August are set to resume this month following intervention by the high court of Andhra Pradesh.

Shantha Biotechnics, the pharmaceutical company that paid NIN US\$140,000 to conduct toxicity trials of its anti-cancer drug interferon- α , sued NIN (one of the 30 Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) institutes) and ICMR for breach of contract when it failed to complete trials on schedule. The company—which plans to sell the drug at \$9 per dose, one quarter of the imported price—won \$25 million in damages due to the delay in its R&D program.

Activists from the Animal Welfare Board (AWB) stormed NIN facilities and released all 34 primates involved in the trial into the wild because it claimed that their cages are too small by international standards. The court has ordered resumption of tests using a new cohort of rhesus monkeys to be captured by state forest officials.

K.S. JAYARAMAN, NEW DELHI

NIH drops PhD plan

The National Institutes of Health's (NIH) proposed PhD-granting program, which seemed ready to blossom this summer, has wilted under criticisms, and NIH officials have now abandoned the plan. In its place, the agency plans to expand its efforts to collaborate with doctoral programs at universities and train scientists in areas of high demand, such as bioinformatics and clinical research.

Although the idea of a PhD program at NIH has been discussed for at least two decades, the first formal proposal to seek degree-granting authority was presented at a 24 May meeting on the Bethesda campus of the NIH (*Nature Med.* 5, 719; 1999). Researchers at the institutes seemed generally in favor of the proposal, but by June an independent advisory committee to NIH director Harold Varmus had started to voice concerns, both about the increasing academic role that NIH would have to adopt under the scheme and about the surplus of biomedical PhDs crowding the job market.

Shirley Tilghman, a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator at Prince-

ton University and a member of the advisory committee, told *Nature Medicine* that "the only justification for a [new] graduate program ... is that there is a national need that cannot be met in already-existing educational institutions." Michael Gottesman, deputy director for intramural research at NIH and principal architect of the PhD plan, argues that the PhD program would have met Tilghman's standard, "especially in the areas of clinical research and bioinformatics, where the need for more highly qualified trainees is apparent." But Gottesman adds that as the debate progressed, "this issue had become too polarizing and contentious, and we believe that we can achieve most of the original goals without requesting degree-granting authority."

So instead, the NIH will expand extramural collaborations, which allow students at universities to receive training at NIH, and officials will meet with representatives from universities this month and present the new plan to the director's advisory committee in December.

ALAN DOVE, NEW YORK