



CHILDREN WITHOUT RACIAL STEREOTYPES
Brain disorder eradicates ethnic but not gender bias.
www.nature.com/news

HERRED14/ISTOCKPHOTO

Panel to take broad view of bioethics

US President Barack Obama last week announced the full membership of his bioethics advisory council, unveiling a more diverse body and one that is likely to have a greater impact on policy than its predecessor.

In the past decade, ethical questions in science have made headlines on issues such as the patenting of human genes, financial conflicts of interest in biomedical research and risk assessments related to environmental exposure to chemicals.

These issues were largely ignored by the bioethics commission established by former president George W. Bush, which maintained a relatively narrow focus on stem cells, cloning and abortion. But all fall within the remit of the new Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, as outlined by the executive order which established it in November 2009.

Obama had already broken with the past by not appointing a bioethicist to

chair the commission, instead selecting Amy Gutmann, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia (see *Nature* 462, 553; 2009).

The 12-person panel unveiled on 7 April includes six scientists and two lawyers and has a wide range of expertise and viewpoints. Unlike the previous 18-member commission, Obama's panel features only two bioethicists. The diversity and qualifications of the new panellists means that "this group has tremendous power and potential," says Patrick Taylor, chief counsel for Research Affairs at Children's Hospital Boston in Massachusetts, adding that the committee's diversity makes it hard to predict how much influence the views of individual members will have on its reports.

Obama's panel reports to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and includes three members from government agencies, who would have been ineligible for previous

panels. In February 1998, bioethicist Ezekiel Emanuel had to leave former president Bill Clinton's bioethics panel on his appointment as chair of the bioethics department at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. The current commission, however, includes Christine Grady, an expert in human subjects research who is currently the acting bioethics chief at the NIH.

George Annas, a bioethicist at Boston University in Massachusetts, fears that the government employees could wield "effective veto power". But bioethicist Thomas Murray of the Hastings Center in Garrison, New York, who served on the commission with Emanuel in the 1990s, thinks that the links may empower the committee: "Individuals placed in government could be in a better position to ensure that the commission's reports get some traction."

Brendan Borrell