

Gene Technology Ethics and Community Consultative Committee

Meeting 1 May 2012

Canberra

COMMUNIQUE

The Gene Technology Ethics and Community Consultative Committee (GTECCC) held its second meeting of the 2011-2014 Triennium in Canberra on 1 May 2012.

GTECCC is a statutory advisory committee established under the Gene Technology Act 2000 (the Act) to provide advice to the Gene Technology Regulator (the Regulator) and the Legislative and Governance Forum on Gene Technology (formerly the Gene Technology Ministerial Council). The function of GTECCC is to provide advice to the Regulator (and the GTMC) on request, on issues of ethical or community concern relating to gene technology. All Committee members and expert advisers hold office on a part-time basis¹.

The purpose of this Communiqué is to provide a brief overview of the key matters considered by GTECCC at its meeting on 1 May 2012

GTECCC Work Plan

National Framework Ethical Principles in Gene Technology (the National Framework)

The GTECCC agreed the final draft of the revised National Framework. The Ethical Framework sets out key principles and values to inform ethical considerations for gene technology and provides a reference point for promoting the ethical conduct of dealings with genetically modified organisms consistent with the national regulatory scheme.

The revised framework will replace and update the National Framework for the Development of Ethical Principles in Gene Technology published by the former Gene Technology Ethics Committee in 2006. The review was informed by two rounds of consultation in 2010 and 2011 with regulated organisations, institutional biosafety committees (IBCs) and other interested stakeholders, including presentation of proposed changes to the 4th National IBC forum in June 2011.

The Ethical Framework will be published as a printed document and distributed and will also be publically available on the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) website.

¹ On 3 February 2011, GTECCC members were appointed for a three year term by the Hon Catherine King MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing.

Synthetic biology

GTECCC considered whether research and development in synthetic biology raises new ethical issues. GTECCC reviewed a number of reports and journal articles discussing synthetic biology and ethics, as well as information regarding whether synthetic biology is distinct from gene technology, and if it is subject to regulation under the Act.

GTECCC agreed the following resolution:

- GTECCC has carefully considered a range of information about synthetic biology, including reports by the US Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (2010), the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-human Biotechnology (2010) and the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (2009), and concluded:
 - synthetic biology does not raise new ethical issues nor have new ethical principles been identified
 - while the term synthetic biology may be new it is essentially part of gene technology
 - the known proposed applications of synthetic biology would be regulated under the Gene Technology Act and subject to the same risk assessment processes
 - if the Regulator becomes aware of any novel applications of synthetic biology or new ethical issues are raised that advice can be sought from the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee and GTECCC;
- GTECCC will maintain a watching brief on developments and reports regarding synthetic biology but there is no need for a GTECCC working group at this time;
- GTECCC recommends that the OGTR provide information on the website about synthetic biology and its regulation under the gene technology regulatory scheme; and
- GTECCC requests that OGTR: review applications that may be considered synthetic biology and provide this information to GTECCC at its next meeting, and provide information on research being done at the ANU on synthetic biology and its regulation.

Community Consultation

GTECCC received an update of the Community Consultation Working Group's discussions on OGTR consultation processes and from the OGTR regarding the ongoing development of its communications strategy. These discussions focussed on the importance of articulating clear communication objectives and identifying who are the audiences for communication.

GTECCC also received a presentation from the Public Awareness & Community Engagement section of the National Enabling Technologies Strategy (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education). This included information about: the Stakeholder Engagement Pathways (STEP) framework and its potential application to consideration of new technologies; NETS engagement with various stakeholders, including regulatory agencies; and an update on the results of public attitudes surveys in relation to biotechnology and nanotechnology.

Risk Communication

GTECCC received an update on the input of the Risk Communication Working Group to the review of the Risk Communication section of OGTR's Risk Analysis Framework (RAF). GTECCC also discussed a draft revision of this chapter. Discussion focussed on clarifying the audience and purpose of the RAF, especially on making it accessible to non-specialist readers and ensuring the risk communication discussion relates clearly to the statutory obligations under the Act. The committee also provided critical feedback on the merits of inclusion of various theories of risk and science communication.

Other Issues for future consideration

The Committee agreed that the Secretariat continue to liaise with the NHMRC regarding potential input to or with collaboration with other committees (Animal Welfare Committee and Australian Health Ethics Committee) that consider issues intersecting with gene technology.

Reports

The Committee received a report from the Gene Technology Regulator regarding the activities of the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator. Reports were also received from the committee's cross-members with the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee (GTTAC) and the Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC).

**For all inquiries, please contact the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator on
1800 181 030 (free-call)**