

**Gene Technology Ethics Committee Meeting**  
**15-16 May 2002, Canberra**

**COMMUNIQUE**

The Gene Technology Ethics Committee (GTEC) held its second meeting in Canberra on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2002. GTEC was established by the *Gene Technology Act 2000* (the Act) as a statutory advisory committee to the Gene Technology Regulator (the Regulator) and the Gene Technology Ministerial Council. All committee members and expert advisers hold office on a part-time basis. (A reference to ‘members’ in the communique includes ‘expert advisers’).

At its second meeting, GTEC’s major focus was on progressing five agreed priority work areas. GTEC also considered reports from a number of national committees, whose work is directly related to GTEC, and information from the Regulator and the GTEC Chairman. A presentation by Biotechnology Australia provided the Committee with an overview of recent studies showing trends in public attitudes to gene technology including changes in areas of concern; ethical issues; and views of regulatory agencies over the past few years. This presentation complemented the Committee’s later discussion of progress on the priority work areas. The outcomes of these discussions are summarised below.

**GTEC’s Work Plan**

GTEC’s major focus for the meeting was to work on progressing five agreed priority work areas. As detailed in GTEC’s first Communique in December 2001 the priority areas are:

1. An assessment of the need to establish an ethical review process for all types of applications for genetic modification work in relation to plants and animals;
2. The ethical aspects of risk in relation to genetically modified organisms (GMOs);
3. The institutional and commercial context of consent in relation to GMOs and their possible impacts on the community;
4. Ethical matters in relation to transgenic animals<sup>1</sup> including animal welfare considerations; and
5. Ethical matters in relation to transkingdom gene transfer<sup>2</sup>.

In December the Committee formed working groups of members, based on relevant expertise and interests, to research and prepare issues papers.

At the May meeting, the working groups presented the draft papers for consideration by the members and the Regulator. Following discussion, the Committee resolved that the areas currently under consideration and the draft papers warranted further development and the working groups, at the request of the full Committee, have agreed to review their work and incorporate the comments received from members at the meeting. Revised papers will be considered at the next GTEC meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> *Transgenic animals* are produced when individual genes from the same or a different species are inserted into another animal.

<sup>2</sup> *Transkingdom gene transfer* involves the transfer of DNA into the cells of an organism from a different ‘kingdom’. Organisms are grouped on the basis of fundamental similarities and common ancestry into a taxonomic system. One widely accepted taxonomic system designates five such kingdoms: animals; plants; fungi; prokaryotes (bacteria); and protista (algae and molds).

## **Genetic Modification of Animals**

As an example of GTEC's current work, the Committee considered a working group paper on 'Ethical Issues Arising from the Genetic Modification of Animals'. The paper covered three aspects of the genetic modification of animals: the techniques involved and their use; the ethical issues arising from the application of these techniques; and the regulatory framework surrounding this type of work. GTEC resolved that the genetic modification of animals is relevant to their agenda and will continue to seek opportunities to participate both formally, as part of any public consultations, and informally, via the cross-member, as part of a review of the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes* (the Code). GTEC further resolved to send a copy of the finalised working group paper to the NHMRC's Australian Health Ethics Committee and the Animal Welfare Committee, members of which are on the Code Liaison Group reviewing the Code.

## **GTEC and Relationships with Other Committees**

GTEC received verbal reports on activities from the cross-members with the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee (GTTAC) and the Gene Technology Community Consultative Committee (GTCCC), which recently held its inaugural meeting. GTEC reconfirmed the valuable role of the cross-members as a conduit for sharing information across the national regulatory scheme. (Copies of the GTTAC and GTCCC communiques are also published on the OGTR web site.)

Members were kept informed of communication between the gene technology advisory committee chairs by the GTEC Chairman and were informed by the Regulator of recent activities and work undertaken by the OGTR.

GTEC received a report from the cross-member with the NHMRC Australian Health Ethics Committee in relation to activities of mutual interest. GTEC also received an update on recent activities in relation to two other relevant NHMRC committees: the Gene and Related Therapies Research Advisory Panel and the Animal Welfare Committee.

GTEC resolved to continue to actively pursue opportunities for enhanced communication with the other gene technology advisory committees and appropriate NHMRC committees in order to avoid duplication of resources and ensure quality outcomes relating to the ethics of gene technology under the Act.

## **Committee Operating Procedures**

GTEC considered a revised draft of its Committee Operating Procedures and, following final revisions, agreed to adopt the procedures as an additional level of detail to assist the working of the Committee. The operating procedures include extracts from the Act, the Gene Technology Regulations 2001, the Remuneration Tribunal and Department of Health and Ageing Financial Operating Procedures. The operating procedures will be reviewed in 12 months time in May 2003.

Copies of the Committee Operating Procedures are available from the OGTR on 1800 181 030 (free-call).

**Next Meeting**

GTEC is scheduled to meet again later in 2002.

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