

Gene Technology Ethics Committee Meeting
23-24 October 2002, Canberra

COMMUNIQUE

The Gene Technology Ethics Committee (GTEC) held its third meeting in Canberra on the 23rd and 24th of October 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 third meeting GTEC focused on the consideration of revised draft reports from working groups established at its inaugural meeting in December 2001. (Details of the agreed priority areas are listed below). Members were informed of relevant work from other national committees via cross-member reports and the Committee received a detailed update from the Regulator on activities undertaken by the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) since their last meeting.

Meeting with the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee

A concurrent meeting of the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee (GTTAC) on 24 October in Canberra provided an opportunity for members to meet face-to-face for the first time to discuss matters of mutual interest.

Following introductions from the Regulator and the respective committee Chairs, coordinators from two of the GTEC working groups gave brief presentations to GTTAC outlining their work in relation to; the ethical context in which gene technology should be viewed; and managing risk ethically in OGTR risk assessment and risk management work.

GTEC Submission on Xenotransplantation

In the period between its second and third meetings GTEC members prepared a submission in response to the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) release of *Draft guidelines and discussion paper on xenotransplantation* for public comment.

The Committee resolved to make its work, 'Gene Technology Ethics Committee Submission on the Draft Guidelines on Xenotransplantation Research', publicly available and it can be accessed on the OGTR website (www.ogtr.gov.au) under the GTEC information page or by telephoning the Committee Secretariat on free-call 1800 181 030.

GTEC's Work Plan

As detailed in GTEC's first Communique from its inaugural meeting in December 2001, the priority areas agreed by the Committee are as follows:

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 animals¹ including animal welfare considerations; and
5. Ethical matters in relation to transkingdom gene transfer².

Since December 2001 internal working groups of members have been working on draft documents in relation to these matters.

At the Regulator's request, the Committee resolved at its most recent meeting to continue with their present work plan and to incorporate the comments received from members at the meeting into further versions of the draft papers. This new work will be considered at the fourth meeting of the Committee in early 2003.

GTEC and Relationships with Other Committees

GTEC received verbal reports on activities from the cross-members with GTTAC and the Gene Technology Community Consultative Committee (GTCCC). Communiqués from meetings of these committees are also published on the OGTR web site.

The cross-member report from the NHMRC Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC) focussed on points of common interest between the two committees. The report identified recent AHEC work in the areas of xenotransplantation and assisted reproductive technology, and developments in relation to legislation to regulate research involving embryos and human cloning activities. The importance of Human Research Ethics Committees in AHEC's work was highlighted to GTEC.

GTEC was updated on recent activities in relation to two other relevant NHMRC committees: the Gene and Related Therapies Research Advisory Panel and the Code Liaison Group (undertaking a review of the *Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (1997)*).

The cross-member reports are an important part of GTEC's communication process and feature as standing items at each meeting.

Next Meeting

GTEC is scheduled to meet again early in 2003.

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

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

² *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).