

Gene Technology Ethics Committee Meeting
25-26 March 2004, Canberra

COMMUNIQUE

The Gene Technology Ethics Committee (GTEC) held its sixth meeting in Canberra on the 25th and 26th of March 2004. 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 March 2004 meeting, the current GTEC working groups reported on their activities since the previous meeting and received feedback and suggestions to further develop their projects. In addition to two presentations by invited guests, members were informed of relevant work from other national committees via cross-member reports, as well as a Chair’s activity report, and a report from the Regulator on activities undertaken by the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator (OGTR) since the fifth meeting held in November 2003. Key outcomes from the meeting are reported below.

GTEC’s Work Plan

GTEC’s first communique from its inaugural meeting in December 2001 detailed a number of priority areas that would form the basis of the Committee’s future work plan and result in the provision of advice to the Regulator. Since that time the working groups have been developing and refining their ideas out-of-session and at each subsequent meeting of the Committee. Details of the status of a number of the current working groups are provided below for information.

Ethical Guidelines in Relation to Genetically Modified Organisms

The working group presented a revised report on the development of ethical guidelines in relation to genetically modified organisms. The revised report incorporated comments provided to the working group at the previous GTEC meeting.

The Committee suggested a number of amendments to further develop the values and principles to be addressed in the guidelines. The guidelines continue to develop in parallel with other documents currently being produced by the Committee.

*Ethical Issues Associated with Transkingdom Gene Transfer*²

The working group, established to consider the ethical issues associated with transkingdom gene transfer, received feedback from the other gene technology advisory committees. The working group valued the comments from the GTTAC and GTEC and resolved to incorporate, where possible, these comments into a revised paper.

Once the paper has been finalised by the GTEC, it will be published on the Committee's page on the OGTR website.

Release of Information and Notification under the Gene Technology Act 2000

As noted in the communique for the November 2003 GTEC meeting, there is overlap between this paper and a similar one currently being produced by GTCCC. The Committee discussed the future direction of this paper and agreed it should be referred to the ethical guidelines working group to inform revision of the values and principles section.

Managing Risk Ethically

The working group presented GTEC with a revised paper that incorporated comments received at the November 2003 GTEC meeting. The paper will now be provided to GTTAC and GTCCC for their comment. On receipt of comments from the other Committees, the document will be made publicly available.

Extent of Ethical Consideration in Applications (formally Qualitative Survey of Institutional Biosafety Committees)

The GTEC has been examining the need for an ethical review for all types of applications for genetic modification work in relation to plants and animals. The Committee agreed not to progress the paper further at this time. GTEC thanked the working group for their progress and the development of working relations with the Victorian Biotechnology Ethics Advisory Committee.

GTEC and Relationships with Other Committees

The Committee welcomed a member from the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) to the meeting who presented the Committee with a draft *Guidelines for the Creation, Breeding, Care and Use of Genetically Modified Animals for Scientific Purposes* for GTEC's comment. As reported in the previous communique, GTEC made a submission to the *Draft Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (7th Edition)* from which the above guidelines developed. GTEC will continue its involvement with the development of *Guidelines for the Creation, Breeding, Care and Use of Genetically Modified Animals for Scientific Purposes*.

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).

The Committee also welcomed an invited guest from the Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC) who reported on the current activities of AHEC. GTEC decided prior to the March 2004 meeting that it would respond to the second call for submissions from the AHEC on the development of *Animal-to-human transplantation research: How should Australia proceed?* GTEC viewed a draft submission prepared by the GTEC working group and provided comments on the draft. The working group will incorporate these comments and finalise the submission to be provided to the AWC. GTEC's submission will be made available on the OGTR website.

GTEC welcomed an invited guest from Biotechnology Australia (BA) who presented an overview of the organisation and the work of the Biotechnology Liaison Committee (BLC), which comprises State, Territory and Australian Government biotechnology officials, regarding a national approach to ethics in biotechnology. The presentation formed the basis of the discussion regarding areas in which GTEC and BLC may collaborate. Once finalised, GTEC will present its ethical guidelines for use of GMOs to the BLC for their consideration. GTEC will also provide interim reports about the progress of the guidelines to the BLC.

As a standing item at every GTEC meeting, the Committee receives verbal reports on activities from the cross-members with the GTTAC and the GTCCC. Communiqués covering meetings for all gene technology advisory committees are publicly available from the OGTR website.

The Regulator reported on the operations of the OGTR. This information is publicly available in Quarterly Reports of the Gene Technology Regulator, available on the OGTR website or on request by phoning the number below.

Next Meeting

The next GTEC meeting will be held in July 2004.

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