

Gene Technology Ethics Committee Meeting
12-13 December 2001, Canberra

COMMUNIQUE

The Gene Technology Ethics Committee (GTEC) held its inaugural meeting in Canberra on the 12th and 13th of December 2001. 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 first meeting the Committee discussed the development of a work plan for GTEC including ethical guidelines for the new gene technology regulatory system. The discussion covered the current and likely future ethical issues in gene technology. The outcomes of these discussions are summarised below.

GTEC and Relationships with Other Committees

GTEC, in considering its role in the new regulatory system for genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Australia, recognised that there are many agencies and committees already operating across a range of biotechnology and health ethics issues. GTEC acknowledged the need to clarify areas of responsibility and pursue effective communication with these other agencies and committees.

For example, GTEC is one of three gene technology advisory committees established under the Act. The other committees are the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee ([GTTAC](#)) and the Gene Technology Community Consultative Committee ([GTCCC](#)). The Act provides for cross membership between the committees.

Therefore, at its first meeting GTEC received a copy of the written communique issued following the inaugural meeting of GTTAC in November 2001 and a verbal report from the cross member. ([A copy of the GTTAC communique can be found on the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator web site.](#)) This exchange of information from GTTAC will be a feature of forthcoming GTEC meetings when a similar report and presentation will be made by the GTCCC cross member.

Another significant stakeholder in this area is [the National Health and Medical Research Council \(NHMRC\)](#) formed under the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act (1992)*. The NHMRC has established a number of committees as an integral part of its grant allocation and health advice processes. These committees include the Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC), the Gene and Related Therapies Research Advisory Panel (GTRAP) and the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC).

In recognition of the important links between GTEC, the other gene technology advisory committees and the NHMRC, GTEC resolved to develop ongoing relationships with these committees as follows:

- A standing item will be included on every GTEC agenda for consideration of committee reports from GTTAC and GTCCC;

- The Office of the Gene Technology Regulator will develop a paper on the role of the member in common with AHEC (with a view to developing clear communication links between the two committees) and will provide this advice at GTEC's next meeting;
- A standing item will be included on every GTEC agenda for consideration of relevant AHEC matters;
- The efficacy of the GTEC/GTRAP relationship will be reviewed in twelve months time by GTEC and the Committee considers that GTTAC may find a similar review of assistance;
- The GTEC/GTTAC cross member will act as the conduit for information from GTRAP when matters from that committee are discussed at GTTAC meetings;
- The AWC will be advised of the outcome of GTEC's December meeting and invited to explore the possibility of progressing joint work in 2002; and
- The possibility of future work with the AWC on the NHMRC review of the *Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes* will be included in the GTEC work plan.

GTEC will monitor developments in the ethics of gene technology and noted that its work will be of interest to other agencies.

Development of Ethical Guidelines for the New Gene Technology Regulatory System

There is a wide range of ethical matters in gene technology. Not all of these areas fall within the purview of the new regulatory system, the objective of which is to protect the health and safety of people and the environment. A number of relevant issues were raised during the extensive public consultation that preceded the new legislation. GTEC, at the request of the Regulator, was asked to examine the range of ethical areas applicable to the new system in order to identify priorities that should be addressed. GTEC identified the following priority areas:

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 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* including animal welfare considerations; and
5. Ethical matters in relation to transkingdom gene transfer**.

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

** *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).

GTEC's Work Plan

At the request of the Regulator, GTEC developed a work plan based on the priority areas identified above that will lead to the development of recommendations for the Regulator in the following areas:

- To research the need to establish an ethical review process for all types of applications for genetic modification work in relation to plants and animals;
- Consideration of the ethical aspects of risk associated with gene technology with a view to providing advice to the Regulator that extends beyond the scientific aspects of risk as referred to in the *Gene Technology Act 2000*;
- Consideration of both the institutional and commercial context of consent in relation to GMOs. This includes consideration of the ethical implications that may arise from individual contracts and in relation to the wider community;
- The Committee recognises the need to examine ethical matters in relation to transgenic animals and associated animal welfare considerations and wishes to exercise provision in this area; and
- Transkingdom gene transfer is also a significant emergent area that the Committee will consider immediately.

The Committee has formed working groups of members based on relevant expertise and interests. These working parties will research and prepare issues papers on these five topics for consideration at GTEC's next meeting in May 2002.

As part of its work plan GTEC:

- Will also seek to work jointly with the NHMRC Animal Welfare Committee on a review of the *Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes* (the Code) via a member in common on GTEC and the Code Liaison Group; and
- Will support participation of the member in common on a working party of the AWC Code Liaison Group specifically examining new technologies and transgenic mice as part of a review of the Code.

Meetings in 2002

GTEC is scheduled to meet again in May and September 2002 (dates yet to be determined).

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