

Gene Technology Ethics Committee Meeting
10-11 November 2003, Canberra

COMMUNIQUE

The Gene Technology Ethics Committee (GTEC) held its fifth meeting in Canberra on the 10th and 11th of November 2003. 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 November 2003 meeting the current GTEC working groups reported on their activities since the previous meeting and received feedback and suggestions to further develop their projects. 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 fourth meeting held in April 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 an initial report on the development of ethical guidelines in relation to genetically modified organisms.

The Committee suggested a number of amendments to further develop the values and principles to be addressed in the guidelines. The working group will continue developing the guidelines 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 provided a revised report to members which incorporated comments from the previous GTEC meeting.

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).

Members agreed the report was close to finalisation and proposed some minor amendments. The Committee noted that the paper was to be provided to the Gene Technology Technical Advisory Committee (GTTAC) and the Gene Technology Community Consultative Committee (GTCCC), and feedback from these Committees would be incorporated as part of the final stages of the report's preparation.

When 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

The GTCCC cross-member brought to the Committee's attention that this paper is similar to a paper currently being developed by the GTCCC (*Review of processes by which the OGTR can improve community consultation and participation*). The Committee acknowledged the overlap and agreed to coordinate activities between the Committees through the cross-member.

The working group will continue to develop the report and incorporate the comments provided by the Committee. A revised report will be prepared for members' consideration at the next meeting in March 2004.

Managing Risk Ethically

The working group provided the draft report which has developed into two parts, for the Committee's consideration. The Committee's comments will be incorporated into a revised draft report and be provided to members at the next meeting in March 2004.

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. At the November 2003 meeting, members formally welcomed a representative from Victorian Biotechnology Ethics Advisory Committee (VBEAC) who had accepted an invitation to join a working group to address this issue.

This working group is undertaking a broad fact-finding exercise relating to the work of Institutional Biosafety Committees, in place of the originally proposed quantitative survey. The working group provided the Committee with a paper outlining the revised approach.

The Committee considered this paper and suggested a number of different avenues that could be pursued to further progress the fact-finding exercise.

GTEC and Relationships with Other Committees

The Committee welcomed a member from the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) to the meeting. It was agreed that the AWC member would liaise with the Committee during the finalisation of a GTEC submission on the *Draft Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (7th Edition)* prepared by the National Health and

Medical Research Council. As reported in the previous communique, GTEC made a submission on the previous draft of the code in June 2003.

As a standing item at every GTEC meeting, the Committee receives verbal reports on activities from the cross-members with the GTTAC, the GTCCC and the OGTR. On behalf of the GTTAC cross-member, the Secretariat reviewed key outcomes from the recent GTTAC meetings. The GTCCC cross-member reported on GTCCC working group developments discussed at the GTCCC meeting in June 2003. 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 which are publicly available in quarterly reports on the OGTR website and from the OGTR on request.

The Committee was also informed of the current activities of the Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC) and that a review of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* is planned for 2004.

Next Meeting

The next GTEC meeting will be held in March 2004.

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