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ADVISING AND INFLUENCING SCIENCE POLICY IN THE UK AND THE US

By Richard Elliott

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Science, engineering and technology have a growing influence on almost every aspect of modern public policymaking. Each month, political debates on matters ranging from healthcare and the environment to education and national security, legislators (most without formal scientific training) encounter a multitude of highly technical concepts and make difficult decisions regarding science policy. It may be unrealistic to expect all of these decisions to be informed by a thorough examination of the latest research. At the very least, legislators however, should have access to a system of scientific advice, enabling them to identify issues requiring scientific input and draw on an appropriate range of expert knowledge to support their decisions.

But just how is the life's work of the research scientist transformed into the latest white paper? Which advisory bodies are providing decision-makers with the expert scientific knowledge that they need? And crucially, how are they adapting to meet growing demand without compromising either scientific integrity or the conventions of the

legislative process? My own research investigates these questions by comparing the mechanisms of government particularly as they relate to areas of science policy upon which these two nations have failed to agree (e.g. stem cell research, climate change, and genetically modified agriculture).

The role of scientifically trained politicians

The landslide Labour victory of 1997 elected more Members of Parliament (MPs) with scientific qualifications than there had ever been before, but there are still only about 10% with a degree-level qualification in science, medicine or engineering (1). Similarly, in the USA, it has been reported that less than five percent of Congressmen/women have such backgrounds (2).

A lack of scientific expertise among legislators may not matter for some political decisions, but there are now so many issues influenced by science and technology that those unable to understand basic scientific concepts are placed at a distinct disadvantage. These individuals are potential prisoners to the advice of scientifically-literate civil servants, expert advisory committees, or lobbyists whose interests may not be immediately apparent. Such groups may, for example, be tied to multinational corporations or biased towards permitting questionable or hazardous actions with the intention of securing profit or employment (3).

But is a lack of scientifically trained politicians really significant for science policymaking? Dr. Evan Harris, an MP, qualified medical doctor and member of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, has stated his admiration for MPs without formal scientific training, who, he suggests, are nonetheless highly capable and generally

successful at grasping unfamiliar scientific concepts (4). While increasing the number of qualified scientists in elected government would undoubtedly assist the accurate communication of science, in theory, there is no reason why the advice of a third party (provided it is accurate, impartial and reflects the diversity of scientific opinion and acknowledges the often inconclusive nature of research) cannot provide a substitute for scientific training among legislators.

Governmental scientific advisory groups

Key bodies with science advisory roles within the UK government include the Office of Science and Technology (OST), directed by the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, his Committee (a cross-departmental forum for the discussion of science and technology-related issues), the Council for Science and Technology, and the Parliamentary Select Committees on Science and Technology. In addition, although they have no formal advisory function, the monthly debates of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee provide a permanent liaison between Parliamentarians and stakeholders representing industry, academia, scientific societies and the general public, allowing the airing of scientific and technological concerns.

Unlike their British counterparts, the Science Advisor to the President and the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) that he directs have no statutory access to the Executive and their influence has varied significantly among administrations, often depending on the Director's personal relationship with the President. Political analysts, scientists and even the former OSTP Director (5)

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have lamented the declining status of these institutions, which has become particularly apparent under the Bush administration (6, p.29). Established in 1972 and dismantled in 1995, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) provided Congress with its own institutional source of expert scientific and technological advice. Analogous to the current UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, the OTA did not provide policy recommendations, but provided Congress with information and objective analyses on a wide range of science and technology issues and their implications for government policy, as well as offering face-to-face briefings for Members of Congress (7).

In place of the OTA, the Congressional Research Service, the Government Accountability Office, the Congressional Budget Office, and other non-government bodies share responsibility for providing scientific and technical advice to Congress. However, in recent years, several authors have criticized this arrangement, suggesting that these entities are ill-equipped to provide the same dedicated service as the OTA and calling for the establishment of a replacement body to fill the gap (6, 8, 9, 10).

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Naively perhaps, the OTA was swept aside with the suggestion that Members of Congress should be able to get the information they need by interacting directly with scientific researchers. While there are undoubtedly politicians on both sides of the Atlantic who contact scientists directly, it is nevertheless overly simplistic to think of scientific advisory bodies as mere intermediaries between researchers and politicians. In fact, at their best, such organizations operate jointly as journalist, translator, and fact-checker all at once (9, p.39). Ostensibly a budget-cutting move, it has been suggested that the real reason for the abolition of the OTA is rooted in partisan division, chiefly the Republican perception of many scientific bodies as institutions symbolic of liberalism (11).

Increased politicization of science advice on Capitol Hill and in the White House is also at the heart of mounting criticism of the Bush administration's relationship with the scientific community. Among other attacks, a petition and two reports, released in 2004 by the Union of Concerned Scientists, accuse the administration of appointing under-qualified individuals and non-scientists to senior roles on the President's scientific advisory staff, of applying political 'litmus tests' to applicants for advisory roles, and of dismissing highly qualified scientific advisors for political reasons (12, 13, 14). The White House has always denied such accusations, saying that it makes decisions based on the best available science.

Non-governmental scientific advisory groups

In addition to government bodies, scientific advice in the UK and the US is also available from an extremely wide variety of independent sources: from online 'blogs' and the inquiries of public-dialogue initiatives to studies sponsored by corporations and advocacy groups, and the scholarly articles of NGOs and learned societies. In the UK, the Royal Society and the Wellcome Trust are two key sources of reliable independent advice, while in the US, the National Research Council (the operating arm of the

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National Academies of Science and Engineering and the Institute of Medicine), produces approximately 600 highly detailed, peer-reviewed reports, workshops and roundtable discussions per year, often at the behest of Congress or other federal agencies (16).

Traditionally, lobby and advocacy groups have been an important part of the US political landscape, but much less significant in the UK. The New Labour strategy of listening to as many diverse interests as possible has led to a dramatic increase in the number of British advocacy groups, but the extent of their political influence is debatable. In Washington DC, think tanks and advocacy groups provide Congress with a great deal of technical expertise, often employing renowned scholars to analyze science policy issues, produce reports, and testify on Capitol Hill. However, as these groups tend to divide along party political lines, policy debates (for example, those on climate change and obesity) can become a sparring match between two sets of experts with competing views, and lead one to question the reliability of the advice. The powerful corporate lobby that has targeted the US Congress for many years is now becoming more prevalent in Europe and, considering recent reports of scaremongering in the European Parliament by manufacturers, apparently has similar problems with corruption (17, 18).

UK OST guidelines suggest that departments should draw on a sufficiently wide range of advisers, both within and outside government, ensuring that their selection matches the nature of the issue and is sufficiently balanced to reflect the diversity of opinion among experts (18, p.4-5). However, the sheer profusion of advisory bodies, many with overlapping responsibilities, and almost all claiming to represent 'sound science', has created a disjointed and impenetrably complex advice system, and makes this task exceedingly confusing. Despite lessons learned from the BSE and foot-and-mouth crisis (20, Vol.1), there remains insufficient awareness and appreciation of science within government departments (21). Despite the growing number of organizations competing to advise and influence government policy, in the US there are no guidelines to govern their role in the policy process or their

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interaction with decision-makers (22).

Conclusions, recommendations and further study.

As a result of scientific and technological progress, scientific advice has become indispensable to policymakers, offering scientists greater social and political influence at the price of increasing public distrust (23). There is no simple or definitive solution for providing scientific advice to legislators. The most striking thing about the responses I received from politicians and advisory groups was the confusion and apparent lack of consensus on this issue. One British parliamentarian went so far as to suggest that I shouldn't "bank on two MPs giving the same answer" (24). Readily available sources of reliable, comprehensive and impartial scientific advice are essential for science policy-making, but they must be accompanied by more extensive guidelines to direct legislators in their use.

Situated on the borderline between officialdom and outside interests, the rise and fall in the political fortunes of organizations like the British CST and the American OSTP and OTA suggests that scientific advisory bodies in both countries are subject to the whim of the prevailing political administration (22, p.168). However, developing new sources of independent scientific advice should be a particular priority in the US, where partisan divisions may already have contributed to the elimination of the OTA and the Bush administration's problematic relationship with science.

My research and the abbreviated discussion presented here have only managed to skim the surface of a topic of rapidly growing importance to both science and politics, and one in which there is immense scope for further study. Additional qualitative analyses, specifically candid interviews with policymakers and their advisers across the framework of government, would pave the way for improved dialogue between scientists, politicians and peripheral stakeholders that will be essential in developing new mechanisms for providing scientific advice to government.

In politics, as with the media and the public, it is important that science

communicators continue to combat the popular myths of science. Specifically, legislators must understand that the work and opinions of scientific experts are neither infallible nor incorruptible, and are seldom in complete consensus, particularly when it comes to the sort of cutting edge research that motives new legislation.

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IN THE NEWS

NEWLY CREATED UK RESEARCH INTEGRITY OFFICE WILL DEVELOP CODES OF CONDUCT, SUPPORT WHISTLEBLOWERS

The United Kingdom's new Research Integrity Office (ROI) has been created to assist research institutions in handling allegations of research misconduct. Its primary mandate is to establish best practice guidelines applicable across institutions throughout the UK. Uniform national policies are needed because, according to Professor Michael Rees, Chair of the British Medical Association's Medical Academic Staff Committee and head of the three-year pilot program that culminated in creation of the ROI, "at present there is no central source for sharing best practice, resulting in a patchy approach across the UK. We hope this initiative will tackle this gap."

Charged with promoting research integrity nationwide, ROI will serve universities and industry, as well as the government's National Health Service. Individual research institutions will remain responsible for investigations of alleged misconduct, as the ROI has no formal mandate to do so. Rather, the office will enable institutions to proactively set ethical research standards. In addition to establishing best practice guidelines, ROI will maintain a register of expert advisors, conduct training programs and seminars, and host a dedicated website (www.UKRIO.org.uk).

In addition, the UK Research Integrity Office will serve as a supportive resource for whistleblowers, who are often instrumental in uncovering fraudulent research practices. The office will be equipped to receive anonymous reports of fraud or misconduct, and capable of marshalling individuals whose expertise may provide guidance.

According to ROI director Dr. Andrew Stainthorpe, a majority of the UK's health and biomedical research organizations support the office and its mandate.

"Drive to cut fraudulent research," BBC News, 12 April 2006 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/health/4903184.stm>)

"Panel to promote good conduct in medical research," Universities UK press release, 12 April 2006 (<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/mediareleases/riolaunch.asp>)

"UK takes action on medical research fraud," Pharmaceutical Business Review Online, 13 April 2006 (http://www.pharmaceutical-business-review.com/article_news.asp?guid=3CF28925-0EEE-44EB-9493-7C411D806134)

Personal communication, Dr. Andrew Stainthorpe, May 2006

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UNESCO WORKING GROUP TACKLES NANOTECHNOLOGY & ETHICS

The Nanotechnology & Ethics Expert Group, an international working group of fourteen ethicists and scientists, met twice in Paris last year to discuss the status of nanotechnology in preparation for a UNESCO Policy Document. The UNESCO Policy Document, composed of several papers outlined below, is expected to be finalized by the spring 2007 meeting of the World Commission of the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology. After its completion, it will serve as an official advisory document for the Director General of UNESCO.

The July 5-6, 2005 meeting introduced draft papers for group consideration in three areas surrounding nanotechnology in society: science, ethics, and policy. The December 6-7, 2005 meeting, and the focus of this report, finalized the papers with input from the entire expert group. Three identifiable themes throughout the meetings were: 1) recognition of the lack of a precise definition of nanotechnology and nanomedicine 2) cautiousness about developing policy in light of this, and 3) difficulty in addressing ethical issues amid intense public hype and disagreement among experts

Within the science section, the group examined papers submitted by Drs. Jun Fundano, Margareth Andrade, and Jixing Liu. Fundano explained the need for analysis of ethical issues that arise with each new advance in nanotechnology and stressed the importance of further definition of the field. Andrade illustrated the

rapid development of nanotech research, the field, encouraging researchers and ethicists to consider the implications at this relatively early stage. Liu focused on new developments in nanotechnology, noting that the progress in basic laboratory research is far exceeding the actual application of the technologies. This may signal a need to partly shift attention to the implementation of developed technologies.

The ethics papers, comprised of contributions from Drs. Donald Evans, Bert Gordijn, and Joachim Schummer, gave a broad overview of the current understanding of ethical considerations in the field. Gordijn's paper addressed the new applications of nanomedicine and recommended a focus on a specific sub-discipline of research within nanotechnology in order to explore fully the ethical issues. Schummer distinguished between the types of definitions of nanotechnology, preferring to use a "real definition" (a list of research areas that fall under the broad heading of nanotechnology) when discussing ethical issues. He also identified two types of ethical issues: 1) those resulting directly from research and development, such as environmental effects of new materials and intellectual property rights, and 2) those resulting from the more general application of nanotechnology in society, such as governance, equity and education. Evans explored the development of medical technologies and their ethical impact on society, particularly within genetics and reproductive assistance. He predicts nanotechnology will face similar ethical issues and asks the question, "Are there important distinctions between making people better and making better people?"

Drs. Abdallah Daar, Michele Jean, and Kyunghee Choi addressed the policy component of nanotechnology. Daar's paper looked at the connections between nanotechnologies and worldwide development, emphasizing the need for developing countries to embrace science and technology to best utilize their resources. Jean noted the need for better public understanding and knowledge to improve the quality of the debate on nanotechnology ethics. Choi focused on

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the educational aspect of nanotechnology, particularly encouraging the involvement of NGOs, governments, and third parties in the effort to educate the public. For further information:

http://portal.unesco.org/shs/admin/ev.php?URL_ID=8958&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201

*HWI

SYNTHETIC BIOLOGISTS ADDRESS IMPACT OF FIELD IN PUBLIC DECLARATION

In the warm California sun, the budding field of synthetic biology attempted to regulate itself in light of ever-expanding research capabilities. The Synthetic Biology 2.0 Conference on May 20-22, hosted by the University of California at Berkeley, saw researchers acknowledge the societal and ethical impact of DNA synthesis and sequence-checking technology. There are no specific government regulations for the field, prompting many synthetic biologists to aim toward initial self-governance to guide its development.

The field of synthetic biology analyzes complex natural systems and replicates those systems artificially, usually with the use of genetic material. Synthetic biologists utilize these new systems for biomedical treatments, renewable energy sources, and other human or environmental needs. Yet the prospect of engineering “natural” biological processes, particularly when dealing with genetics, has proved controversial. Early on, synthetic biology has encountered opposition, even in its most recent quest for self-governance. In an open letter addressed to the participants of the SB2.0 conference, groups such as Genewatch UK and the International Center for Bioethics, Culture and Disability criticized the unrestrained rapid growth of the field, urging researchers to refrain from self-regulation and instead “join with society to demand broad public oversight and governmental action to ensure social wellbeing.” However, SB2.0 participants came to a consensus that self-governance is the correct first step and adopted the “Declaration of the Second International Meeting on

Synthetic Biology,” which was made available online for public comment from May 29- June 7, 2006. The final version, incorporating public comments and suggestions, will be published soon.

The Declaration stressed key provisions in the public draft:

1) “First, we support the organization of an open working group that will undertake the coordinated development of improved software tools that can be used to check DNA synthesis orders for DNA sequences encoding hazardous biological systems; we expect that such software tools will be made freely available.”

2) “Second, we support the adoption of best-practice sequence checking technology, including customer and order validation, by all commercial DNA synthesis companies; we encourage individuals and organizations to avoid patronizing companies that do not systematically check their DNA synthesis orders.”

3) “Third, we support ongoing and future discussions within international science and engineering research communities for the purpose of developing creative solutions and frameworks that directly address challenges arising from the ongoing advances in biological technology, in particular, challenges to biological security and biological justice.”

4) “Fourth, we support ongoing and future discussions with all stakeholders for the purpose of developing and analyzing inclusive governance options, including self-governance, that can be considered by policymakers and others such that the development and application of biological technology remains overwhelmingly constructive.”

At press time, the final version of the Declaration was not yet available. For further information:

<http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/32982>

<http://syntheticbiology.org/>

<http://www.etcgroup.org/article.asp?newsid=562>

*HWI

GREETING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The Center for American Progress held a day long seminar this April entitled “Bioethics and Politics: Past, Present, and Future,” where bioethics scholars acknowledged both the increasingly political nature of bioethics and the formidable presence of conservatives, religious groups, and republican leadership in directing bioethics dialogue. The program consisted of three components, the first of which was a panel discussion on how bioethics has played an increasing role in political dialogue and public policy. Next, Patricia King, a law professor and bioethics veteran, shared some her experiences and ideas about the intersection of bioethics and politics. Finally, scholars and professionals discussed the current scene in bioethics and hypothesized the trajectory of bioethics and politics. This report will focus on the first panel.

“The Emergence of Politicized Bioethics” panel included Dan Callahan (The Hasting Center), John Evans (UCSD), Ruth Faden (Johns Hopkins University), and Eric Meslin (Indiana University). Dan Callahan spoke to audience members about the early days of bioethics: from the early sixties, when it was “fashionable to be wary of technology” because of its association with the Vietnam War and weapons development, to the 80s and 90s, when the cultural trend was to embrace and legitimate technology. Initially there were two tracks of bioethical thought – the “Ethics of Ends,” i.e., what does society want from biology, and the “Ethics of Means,” i.e., how should society regulate biology and protect autonomy.

The Ethics of Ends track eventually disappeared in favor of the Ethics of Means, as the audience for bioethics shifted from the public to the political elite for whom regulation was priority. In the 90’s, reaction from conservatives against the apparent capture of bioethics by pro-technology liberals sparked culture wars. Callahan took a moment to criticize both sides of the debate for their “tendency to leave decisions to market choices,” which he argues is the “worst possible idea” for addressing controversial bioethics issues.

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Next, Ruth Faden presented her own hypotheses about why and how bioethics has become politicized. Faden assumes that the politicized bioethics is a recent phenomenon and that “politicized” refers to something more than “commentators lining up on different sides on bioethics issues.” Faden’s premise is that politicized bioethics refers to the recent trend of bioethics “being used to serve the political agenda of a particular ideology.” She hypothesizes two reasons for this. The first is that the very nature of current bioethics issues entails a deep left/right divide. Current issues like abortion, embryonic stem cell research, etc., demonstrate this polarization, while past issues lack this facet, instead being overwhelmingly one-sided (e.g., human subjects research). The second is that “the maturing and expanding of American conservatism on social issues” has caused this corresponding politicization of bioethics. Despite the current political battles being waged in bioethics, Faden believes there is some cause for optimism because there are still a number of non-politicized bioethics issues to be addressed.

Eric Meslin offered a very different view of the issue. Meslin pointed out the intrinsically political nature of government advisory committees and groups that deal in bioethics. First, the creation of the advisory body itself is a political act, in that it is constituted by political leaders and in the public sphere. Second, it is expected that the advisory body will have a political impact, from the name of the group, to membership selection, to the issues it will address. Meslin added that even the public content of letters and reports bare the imprint of political affect, referring to how the editing process advances specific political agendas. Finally, the “political currency” allotted to advisory committees, such as the Presidential seals, authority and expertise, is yet another way in which bioethics advisors are political actors. The nature of bioethics advisory committees is just half of the story; the current environment also lends itself to politicization. Present day advisory committees work in the public sphere on

a 24-hour news cycle thanks to the internet, television, and radio. There is an increased awareness of advisory bodies and how they impact dialogues internationally. In addition, the fact that more government dollars are pouring into science makes regulation all the more salient to politicians and the public.

Evans offered a sociological look at how various religious and cultural ideology shifts have shaped current bioethics. Evans insisted that bioethicists and others should be glad that more viewpoints are being included in bioethics discussion. Since many religious views, especially expressly conservative ones, have been marginalized in bioethics dialogues in the past, the fact they are now included, even dominating the debate, is a clear sign the debate is more inclusive. He argued that the key to the current alignment of bioethics was the timing. Evans noted that George W. Bush, an evangelical conservative, came to power in the midst of all these polarized issues. Religious conservatives were still excluded from scholarly debate of bioethics, so they turned to these commissions and advisory boards to force a dialogue. The demographics of the political elites shifted towards numbers that favored similar conservatives. Evans further argued that the tables are turning, and conservatives are now trying to exclude progressives as they were once excluded. He concluded that progressives need to cut their losses before they are completely excluded from the bioethics debate, and before bioethics is rendered completely fraudulent. In the public arena, the progressives should avoid trying to convert public opinion, but simply educate and let the public choose sides.

The question and answer session following the panel discussion raised some particularly troubling issues for many bioethicists attending. Questions included ‘What role should bioethicists have in politics: independent and objective vs. advocate and subjective?’ ‘If bioethics itself has become political, can bioethicists remain impartial?’ Panelists seemed to have no answer to these questions, responding that it very much depends on the context. Communication was another problem mentioned in the question portion. How do both sides

talk to each other when one side is based on secular philosophies and the other on religious doctrine? The consensus seemed to be that while these conversations are frustrating for both sides, they are critical to the role of bioethics in the public dialogue.

The second panel, and focus of the rest of this report, featured scholars and professional discussing current bioethics and hypothesizing the trajectory of bioethics and politics. Kathryn Hinsch used competitive analysis to address concerns that liberal bioethics is losing ground to conservatives in the public and political sphere. Hinsch, Founding Director of the Women’s Bioethics Project, presented findings suggesting only conservatives and religious groups have devoted substantial financial, and political resources to affecting bioethics policy. Conservatives have done this in a number of ways including: “dividing progressives, polishing [conservative’s] image as a protectors, and galvanizing grassroots against women’s reproductive rights.” She used the example of Americans United for Life to elucidate her argument. This formerly single issue pro-life group has added the broader issue of bioethics to its agenda. This group now ranks states as the Top Ten Most “Dangerous” and the Top Ten Most “Safe” States based on women’s reproductive safety in abortion clinics as opposed to pure availability of procedures^[1]. One mechanism used to “rally” conservative troops has been framing the conflict as a true battle of good versus evil. In one case, the Pope publicly condemned geneticists in a major newspaper. Hinsch points out that the funding for these organizations is hard to track because consortiums and think-tanks funding these efforts are also obscuring the source of the funds. The breadth of the conservative effort includes not only diversity in agenda and funding, but a potentially global target audience as well. Organizations like The Federalist Society are heavily trying to influence United Nations and international policy.

James Fossett, Associate Professor of Public Policy and Public Health at the University of Albany, State University of New York, suggested that liberal bioethics take the fight to a new battle ground – the states.

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Progressive bioethics has typically focused on national affect but could make significant headway if it looked more towards state law. Typically dismissed because of the dismal outcome in slavery and racial issues in the past, Fossett claims states no longer deserve the “bad wrap.” State level efforts offer two major benefits, according to Fossett: “as separate entities...[they are] good sites for dealing with non-consensus and public preferences,” and they have a “powerful” impact on both levels of government because they serve as “laboratories of democracy.” Fossett went on to profile policy at the state level as a means to “geographically deal with pluralism,” “provide multiple forums” (i.e., ‘progressives have used states in past when administration has been conservative and non-responsive’), and “have relatively stable policy.” Fossett suggested liberal bioethicists appeal to state-level economics and re-election goals. Governors seeking re-election know that the strength of the state economy makes a huge difference at the ballot box, and “this may leave some conservative looking red states looking more pink” as they try to encourage biotech and pharma companies to build in their states (e.g., Missouri and Texas). Prestige is another powerful incentive to state politicians, and luring more top scientists to universities and more big name companies could be a great feather in a savvy politician’s hat. Fossett pointed out that, since progressives are losing the policy and public relations game against conservatives/republicans, if they want to turn the tide, they may have to simply “take what they can get” and work at the individual state level to foster change.

Virginia Ashby Asharpe, Visiting Scholar in Ethics and Environmental Justice, Georgetown University, discussed how environmental issues used to be apart of the inaugural “cannon of bioethics” but were shut out because of the difficulty in assigning blame to specific actors, a feature common to other “bioethics” topics. Sharpe argued that we need to get the environment back on the bioethics agenda, in part because better research tools help paint a clearer picture of what is happening to the environment. Another reason is envi-

ronmentalists are able to reframe environmental issues so that “environmental issues are health issues, local and international security issues, economic issues, and social justice issues.” She suggested that progressive bioethics should stick to the traditional academic dialogue and seek to engage other like-minded groups, not merely react to conservatives. She also cautioned that bioethicists engaging in private sector consulting with biotechnology companies must do their best to “retain the ethics of bioethics,” not just support private party interests to the detriment of others.

Glenn McGee, Founding Director of the Alden March Bioethics Institute, began his presentation by claiming that, “Bioethics is low-tech... We [bioethicists] are Luddites.” McGee suggests bioethics, in particular, progressive bioethics, develop internet resources like blogging. Blogging is an online messaging system in which users can post responses to various prompts, articles, and news in realtime. Conservative bioethicists have again beaten liberal bioethicists to the punch with a number a well established blogs like: Second Hand Smoke, The Human Future, and The Thing Is. The speed and breadth of access possible through this medium allows for a rich and timely dialogue among bioethics without the delay of the peer-review publication process. But along with the benefits, there is the corresponding challenge in the lack of credentialed peer-review. McGee holds that despite this concern, the medium will play an increasingly important role for both sides of the bioethics debate. Several renowned journals, like *Nature*, are reportedly working on blogs linked to the magazine. McGee then went on to describe his current project, the Bioethics Forum, which, though similar in format to a blog, works more like an online journal with careful monitoring and review by accredited experts in the field.

*EAW

HHS COMMITTEE CONSIDERS GIANT POPULATION STUDY, EXPRESSES ENTHUSIASM FOR POTENTIAL PROJECT

In 2004, the HHS Secretary’s Advisory Committee on Genetics, Health, and

Society (SACGHS) was tasked with examining the problems that might arise in conducting a massive population study in the United States. In a preliminary report released this past May, the committee identifies key concerns regarding such a project and suggests multiple methods by which to address them, voicing its enthusiasm at the prospect of the project’s undertaking.

The hypothetical project, which would gather data and biological samples from hundreds of thousands of human subjects, raises scientific, public, and ethical concerns due to the sheer magnitude of the assignment. Acknowledging these concerns, the SACGHS report emphasizes the need to keep the public informed of the project’s purpose and procedures, citing the importance of maintaining public trust and gathering public feedback. Additionally, the report identifies five areas of potential issues: research policy, research logistics, regulatory/ethical considerations, public health implications, and social implications.

Among the committee’s primary research policy concerns are potential disputes over intellectual property rights and the depletion of available funding for other projects. From a logistical angle, the report spots possible complications in the project’s ability to collect environmental information and to capture the diversity of an entire population. Ethical concerns include the typical yet magnified problems of informed consent and privacy, while public health worries highlight the gap between risk identification and the delivery of appropriate treatment.

In response to these concerns, the SACGHS report recommends a host of preventative measures. Suggestions include the creation of a multi-disciplinary project leadership, the establishment of clear and consistent definitions of sub-populations, and the formation of an independent committee of experts in science, law, and ethics charged with examining the project’s social ramifications. The report adds that all project findings ought to be released upon their emergence, along with descriptions of possible clinical uses.

In addition to these recommendations, the committee proposes the

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creation of a working group tasked with determining the most ethical procedures for the project. The committee specifies that any such group ought to contain members of relevant HHS agencies, the FDA, and the Office for Human Research Protections, among others.

According to the SACGHS, a population study involving hundreds of thousands of participants could prove an invaluable resource to droves of future scientific projects. The wealth of data and tissues gathered in such an undertaking would allow researchers to comprehensively study the locations of individuals' genetic variants, the distinctions in the variants of healthy and sick individuals, and the interactions between genetic variants and the environment. Eventually, a large population study could lead to significant strides in our understanding of the relationship between genes, the environment, and diseases. Recognizing this, the SACGHS expresses a keen interest in the realization of the project, concluding that despite multiple challenges, the benefits of a large population study would be significant.

<http://www4.od.nih.gov/oba/sacghs/reports/LPS%20Public%20Comment%20Draft%20Report.pdf>
Public comments welcome until July 31, 2006.

*ENB

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The American Society for Bioethics and the Humanities (ASBH) is sponsoring a conference on "Bioethics and Politics: The Future of Bioethics in a Divided Democracy." The conference will take

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American Anthropological Association
American Political Science Association
American Psychological Association
Association for Psychological Science
American Society for Engineering Education
American Sociological Association

place July 13-14, 2006 in Albany, New York. The evolving role of political influence in bioethics, political bias in bioethics, and the future of bioethics in a democratic society will be discussed. ASBH is seeking papers for interactive conference sessions. A 250-word abstract describing the original work should be submitted. Topics of interest include: the difference between academic and political advocacy, the possibilities for dialog across political lines, and the emerging role of religious and politically-affiliated bioethics centers. Additional conference information is available at <http://politics.bioethics.net>.

The Ethics Education Program sponsored by UNESCO disseminates information on the recently adopted Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights. The program maps existing teaching programs in the area of ethics in the UNESCO member states. The programs are described and made available in the Global Ethics Observatory (GEO) (www.unesco.org/shs/ethics/geobs). To promote quality ethics education, UNESCO developed an Ethics Teacher Training Course. The first course will occur October 30-November 3, 2006 in Bucharest, Romania. A similar course will be scheduled for 2007 in another region. Registration information is available at http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/ev.php-URL_ID=9448&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

The University of Montana is offering short courses in ethics during summer 2006. The courses are open to students, interested professionals, and the general public. There is no out-of-state tuition

fee for the courses. Classes include "Theory and Skills of Ethics Teaching," "Ethics of Contemporary Controversies," "Foundations for Ethical Business Practice," and "Environmental Aesthetics." Registration information and complete course descriptions are available at <http://www.umd.edu/ethics>.

Washington University in St. Louis is sponsoring a conference on "Mentoring and Supervision for the Responsible Conduct of Research." The conference will be held July 24-25, 2006, at the Eric P. Newman Education Center, WU School of Medicine campus. Principal investigators will acquire the knowledge to evaluate their own mentorship and supervision of postdoctoral fellows and staff. Coordinators, postdocs, grad students and staff will learn how to talk to their PIs and identify research practices that create risk for a breach of responsible research practice. Session topics include: Participant Eligibility, Enrollment and Consent, Maximizing Compliance and Minimizing Adverse Events, Best Practices in Data Management, and Responsible Authorship. Scholarships are available to graduate students. To register, or for more information, visit <http://epi.wustl.edu/msrcr.htm>

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) is soliciting proposals from CGS member institutions for teaching graduate students the responsible conduct of research. These projects will be funded by a grant to CGS from NSF, and must target students in physical sciences and engineering. CGS will award \$15,000 to eight institutions. The goals of this project are: to continue to develop a core of graduate dean leadership for responsible conduct of research (RCR) and generate information about what works in RCR training across disciplinary boundaries. Activities supported by the award may include, but are not limited to, development of new, interdisciplinary RCR courses; sponsorship of RCR events for faculty; assessment and evaluation of student learning about RCR issues; and collection and management of data. Applications must be received by August 11, 2006. For more information, contact Paul Tate, ptate@cgs.nche.edu