



MIT-Harvard Conference on Genetic Technology and Society

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World's Most Influential Players in Genetic Technology To Discuss the Future of Genetics: Meeting Organized by Harvard and MIT Undergraduates

Cambridge, MA – March 10th, 1999: On March 13th and 14th, Ian Wilmut, who cloned Dolly, Congressman James Sensenbrenner, who chairs the House Science Committee, and twenty other Nobel laureates, politicians, corporate CEOs, and religious leaders are coming to Cambridge to debate genetic technologies and how they should be regulated. Everything from genetic testing to eugenics to genetically engineered foods will be discussed. One thousand students and professionals are expected to attend.

Presenters include Walter Gilbert, a University professor at Harvard who won the Nobel prize for developing DNA sequencing technology; Robert Weinberg, a recipient of the National Medal of Science who discovered the first human oncogene (a gene that can cause cancer) and the first tumor suppressor gene; Philip Sharp, head of the biology department at MIT who won the Nobel prize for discovering that genes are interrupted by non-coding sequences called introns; and Jeremy Rifkin, one of the nation's most outspoken and influential critics of biotechnology.

Many of the conference panelists have pioneered new strategies for using genetics to understand and treat human diseases. William A. Haseltine, Chairman and CEO of Human Genome Sciences, will discuss the progress that his company has made in bringing the first drugs from genomics to clinical trials. "I look forward to addressing new prospects for the future of medicine with this most stimulating audience," says Haseltine. Kári Stefánsson, President and CEO of deCODE Genetics, recently made international headlines for his controversial plan to compile a central database of the health records of all Icelanders. Stefánsson says that this database will enable his company to hunt down disease-causing genes, eventually leading to better diagnostics or treatments.

Several other conference speakers caution against taking genetic technology too far. "Genetics will provide many opportunities in human medicine," says Wilmut, but "there will also be misuses of the knowledge." Rifkin, who describes biotechnology as a "great historic transition," has even greater reservations, cautioning that "the new genetic commerce raises more troubling questions than any other economic revolution in history."

With such a diverse group of speakers, Sharp predicts that "this student-organized meeting ... will stimulate discussions in dorm rooms across the city and country." "We wanted to organize a discussion on genetics that everyone could understand and benefit from," adds Harvard Conference Director F. Edward Boas. MIT Conference Director Kelly V. Brogan explains that "this conference is an opportunity for vital discourse on topics that will shape all aspects of life." George Annas, Chair of the Health Law Department at Boston University, agrees, describing this event as a "fantastic opportunity to explore the implications of genetics research."

Although organized entirely by undergraduate members of the Harvard and MIT chapters of the Hippocratic Society, this conference has gained some prominent sponsors, including Nature Publishing Company and the Office of the President at both Harvard and MIT. "The young men and women who organized this program," writes Neil L. Rudenstine, President of Harvard University, "have provided you with a special opportunity to get to know people from a wide range of disciplines — including medical research, government, religion, law, and academia — and to discuss with them the most significant issues facing genetic technology today."

More information on this conference is available at <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hippoc>