

1st Meeting of Bioethics Council

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The first meeting of the Irish Council for Bioethics took place in Dublin yesterday (15th May 2002). The Royal Irish Academy has established it as an independent body to consider the ethical issues raised by developments in biotechnology. Such issues might include genetically modified crops, stem cell research, or genetic screening. The Council will clarify the ethical issues involved and communicate them to decision makers, scientists and the general public. The government will also be able to refer questions to the Council for consideration and advice.

Professor Patrick Fottrell, MRIA, biochemist and former President of the National University of Ireland, Galway, is the Council's first chairman. He says that the Council is much needed as Ireland seeks to become a world leader in Biotechnology research and as developments in Biotechnology evolve so rapidly

The Council's membership of twenty-one consists of lawyers, philosophers/ ethicists, medics, geneticists, food scientists, biologists, microbiologists, biochemists, and journalists. 'Only interdisciplinary cooperation can bring about an effective exploration of the complex ethical questions which biotechnology brings' says Professor Fottrell.

The Council members are: Professor Patrick Cunningham MRIA, TCD Department of Genetics; Mr Matt Dempsey, Irish Farmers' Journal; Dr Dolores Dooley, UCC Department of Philosophy; Dr Margaret Fitzgerald, Food Safety Authority of Ireland; Dr Patrick Flanagan, formerly of the Environmental Protection Agency; Mr Dermot Gleeson SC, former Attorney General; Professor Patrick Hannon, St Patrick's College, Maynooth; Mr Kenneth Kearon, Irish School of Ecumenics; Professor Cecily Kelleher, NUIG Department of Health Promotion; Dr Mark Lawler, Cancer Molecular Diagnostics Laboratory, St James's Hospital; Dr Tony McGleenan, QUB School of Law; Mr Peter McKenna, Rotunda Hospital; Ms Mary Mulvihill, Science Writer; Dr Nora O'Brien, UCC Department of Food Science, Food Technology and Nutrition; Professor Fergal O'Gara, UCC Microbiology Department; Professor Ronan O'Regan MRIA, UCD Department of Human Anatomy and Physiology; Professor Anne Scott, DCU School of Nursing; Mr Asim Sheikh, UCD Division of Legal Medicine; Professor Seán Strain, UU School of Biomedical Sciences, and Professor Peter Whittaker, Institute of Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy at Lancaster University and formerly of the NUIM Biology Department.

The establishment of the Council was recommended by the Report of the Inter-Departmental Group on Modern Biotechnology in October 2000. The post of a full-time scientific director will be advertised shortly and the Council will meet again in June to decide on its programme of work for its three year term of office.

ENDS

Additional information

Terms of reference of Irish Council for Bioethics

- To identify and interpret the ethical questions raised by biological and medical research in order to respond to, and anticipate, questions of substantive concern.
- To make arrangements for examining and reporting on such questions with a view to promoting public understanding and discussion; this may contribute, where needed, to the formulation of new guidelines by the appropriate regulatory or other body.
- In the light of the outcome of its work, to publish reports, to stimulate discussion through other means, including conferences, workshops, and lectures.

Members have been invited to join the Council by virtue of their personal expertise, distinction and authority and not as representatives of particular bodies or professions. Members of the Council shall be obliged to make a declaration of relevant interests to ensure transparency.

The Irish Council for Bioethics will be autonomous. The Academy's role will be that of nominating the membership and providing the secretariat for the Council. The Council shall be free to express views independently of the Academy and those views shall therefore not necessarily represent the Academy's viewpoint.

The Royal Irish Academy is an independent all Ireland body established to promote study and excellence in the sciences, humanities and social sciences. It co-ordinates scholarship on a cross institutional, inter-disciplinary, national and international basis. The Academy was founded in 1785 and currently has a membership of approximately 300. Membership of the Academy is by election and is open to people who have attained academic distinction by their published work.