

December 1, 1976

Mrs. Joan H. Joshi  
Vice President  
Exchange Programs Department  
Institute of International Education  
809 United Nations Plaza  
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Mrs. Joshi:

I have read your interesting "Proposal for an International Conference on the Social and Ethical Implications of Genetic Engineering". As you know, there has been a discussion in both the scientific community and various public forums during the last three years on certain aspects of this problem. This discussion has emphasized the question of the safety of experiments referred to as "recombinant DNA technology". However the safety questions, and indeed "recombinant DNA" itself, are only a limited part of the broader question of genetic engineering, as the term is generally understood. There are indeed a variety of issues posed by the possibility that genetic engineering may become feasible at some time in the relevant future. And it is appropriate that the discussion of these issues involve many different views.

Therefore your plan for an international conference on these matters, and the publication of the contributions of that conference is a worthwhile undertaking. I was particularly pleased to see that you view the promotion of continuing public discussion as an important objective of the conference.

I would like to take this opportunity to comment on two statements in the Proposal, which, in my view, might be phrased somewhat differently. First, on the first page, near the bottom, the wording implies that the spread of cancer by altered bacteria might be an inherent danger in experiments now in progress. At least within the United States, I am unaware that such experiments are in progress. The Guidelines for Research with Recombinant DNA Molecules, published by the National Institutes of Health in June, 1975, prohibit many of the experiments that might have the potential for the spread of genes from oncogenic viruses. Those relevant experiments that are theoretically permissible under the Guidelines are not feasible for NIH grantees at this time because of the lack of appropriate certified facilities and host-vector systems.

Second, on page 3, in the second paragraph: there is a very wide spectrum of views regarding the new techniques and the experiments themselves are of varying potential hazard. To classify people as opponents or supporters, befuddles this complex issue. Further, those who support proceeding with experiments under the conditions of the guidelines, and indeed those who favor continuing research with less stringent, or no Guidelines, have clearly established their willingness to take part in, and their belief in the appropriateness of, public debate. To imply otherwise is to misread the record.

Please note that my views, as expressed here, are my own and are not to be taken as the views of either the National Cancer Institute or the National Institutes of Health.

Sincerely yours,

Maxine F. Singer, Ph.D.  
Head, Nucleic Acid Enzymology Section  
Laboratory of Biochemistry