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Interchurch Commission on Genetic Engineering closing submission

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Interchurch Commission on Genetic Engineering

CLOSING SUBMISSION

from

THE INTERCHURCH COMMISSION ON GENETIC ENGINEERING

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The Interchurch Commission on Genetic Engineering represents the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The role of the churches in this debate is seen as representing particularly ethical, spiritual, theological and cultural values. In order to achieve this, we held meetings throughout New Zealand and took into account the wide-ranging input we received.

Since the presentations of our written and oral submissions to the Royal Commission and also presentations at annual church conferences, there has been increased interest in the implications of GM for New Zealand, evidenced by requests to speak at numerous seminars and meetings in churches throughout New Zealand.

This submission provides a summary of our earlier submissions, but is expanded in response to other submissions and to comments which have been made to us since our earlier submissions.

Throughout the enquiry the media has represented the situation as an alignment of what might be called the extreme right, including scientists, pragmatists and farmers in favour of GM, and the extreme left comprising the Greens, the churches and Maori against GM. Both these poles suffer from a tendency to deny the validity of any components of each other's views. The Interchurch Commission seeks a position of truth and openness and stresses that the use of GM technology must be examined on a case by case basis.

During the course of this hearing, there have been suggestions from a number of those involved in science, either directly or indirectly, that ethical and religious concerns have no basis. In fact, such concerns are deeply based in the beliefs and cultures of our society, and there are deep theological and philosophical questionings of what are seen as inappropriate human interventions in 'nature', including the transfer of genes between species.

Scientific and economic reasons have been proposed as the deciding factors on what is good for New Zealand. In fact there is another sort of rationality, not only a question of sociology or psychology, but based on people's ethical and religious values and beliefs.

It is a widely held opinion in the community that the profit motive should not be the predominant criterion in deciding what is beneficial for New Zealand, and much concern was expressed to us that what are seen as 'Corporate values' may override the concepts of

respecting people's beliefs and having an attitude of responsibility for the environment, and for others in the world who are less fortunate than ourselves. Related to this is the strong conviction that human genes contain information which belongs to the whole of humankind, and it should be illegal to patent human genes. It is nevertheless recognised that applications relating to the use of human genes may be patented in the interests of research being carried out to the benefit of all, particularly in the field of medical research and development.

The use of transgenic animals in which human genes have been transferred to other mammals raises concerns for animal welfare and questions as to whether humans have the right to do whatever they like regardless of future consequences for the rest of creation. There are also strong cultural issues, including such practical concerns as what will happen eventually to these animals which now are seen as 'special' because they contain human genes, i.e. part of our inheritance or whakapapa.

A number of submissions made to the Royal Commission have been in agreement with our contention that the use to which GM technology is to be put has a significant effect on its acceptability to the New Zealand community. This relates to the ethical requirement that the benefit must outweigh the risk and the ethical input to the deliberations of the New Zealand GM Regulatory Council would take this into account.

We do not subscribe to the view which has been expressed by some groups that there should be no GM research in New Zealand, or the premise that only laboratory work should be approved.

Field trials applications should be put before the proposed GM Regulatory Council and approval given only when sufficient data regarding possible contamination of the environment have been supplied and appropriate containment procedures have been put in place. It must be recognized that in some instances adequate pre-field trial data may not be available, or it may not be possible to sufficiently control dissemination of GM plants or other organisms. In such cases approval cannot be given and the development of new technology may be required. Indeed there may be some GM technology which will not be approved in New Zealand in the foreseeable future.

No commercial trials have been undertaken in New Zealand to date, and there are no regulations in place to set up or monitor such trials. No commercial trials should be approved until appropriate regulations are in place, and until comprehensive data are available regarding possible dissemination and risks to the environment, whether plant or animal, and including potential consumers. There must also be clear lines of accountability and liability, similar to that required for medical trials with new drugs.

We believe the way forward should include the following:

The establishment of a GM Regulatory Council, as has been described in our written submission and modified in our oral submission. A similar concept was presented by UNESCO witnesses in their oral submission.

There should be case-by-case consideration of applications for GM research, except in the case of low risk experiments in containment, in which situation research may be approved by Institute Ethics Committees. The level of risk where this would apply would be determined by the GM Regulatory Council.

It has been pointed out to us since we made our oral submission that an informed public should also know what research is being done using GM technology, particularly as this often makes use of taxpayers' money. This could be achieved through an openness in the processes of the GM Regulatory Council.

There would be a highly significant ethical, spiritual and cultural input into the deliberations of the GM Regulatory Council, in addition to the scientific input of ERMA and other bodies, such as the Ministry of Health committees when medical research was involved. As with regional and national health ethics committees, the council would comprise at least half laypersons. Members of the Council would be selected from nominations by community groups and individuals in such a way as to avoid political manipulation.

We support the suggestion made in the UNESCO submission that ethics should be taught in schools, and believe that the way in which ethical decisions are made can be related to everyday decisions for even young children.

As a commission, we re-iterate that in relation to the use or consumption of genetically modified foods, pharmaceuticals, organisms or other products the whole community (and the potential consumers in particular) must have the opportunity to give or withhold informed consent. This pre-supposes that there are non-GM alternatives available, and there are areas e.g. GM insulin where it has been shown (British Diabetic Society) that the provision of an alternative is essential for the well-being of some consumers. There is also a requirement that all possible information be available, including the extent to which possible risks are known and understood, or to which there is insufficient knowledge for risk assessment.

We support the precautionary principle as defined by Rev. Dr Donald Bruce at the OECD Conference in Edinburgh 2000, that there should be a prudent approach to risk regulation that takes account of potential accidents for which there are no or insufficient empirical data. We accept the contention that nothing is without risk, but require that there is openness and honesty about the extent to which scientific knowledge is limited.