
Fifth Annual Seminar on Biotechnology - The patenting of higher life forms and xenotransplantation

The Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) held its fifth annual forum on biotechnology, focusing on the patenting of higher life forms and xenotransplantation. The forum, held March 20-21, 2002, in Ottawa, brought together bishops, scientists, lawyers, ethicists, theologians and Church staff to examine these complex issues.

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Notwithstanding the ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada that the Harvard mouse, genetically engineered for cancer research purposes, cannot be patented in Canada as a new life form, forum participants remain concerned about the ethical considerations of future patent legislation. Some countries have already ruled that patents can be granted over human DNA sequences and genetically modified animals.

As for the impact of patenting higher life forms, forum participants stressed once again the importance of respecting human dignity. They also expressed concern about protecting human genetic integrity, preventing the objectification and commodification of human life, the danger of exploiting the human person, equal access to the basic resources of life, and recognition of the value of all life forms. For forum participants, the fundamental questions are what it means to be human and what is our relation to the rest of creation. It was agreed these are the fundamental issues in ecological and environmental ethics.

Xenotransplantation

Also part of the forum were presentations on xenotransplantation by Dr. François Pothier, professor with the Department of Animal Sciences, Faculty of Agriculture, Laval University, who specializes in genetic transplantation (genetic manipulation), and by Dr. Thérèse Leroux, professor with the Faculty of Law at the University of Montreal, who has a doctorate in medical biochemistry. Xenotransplantation involves the transplantation of tissue and organs between different species, and in particular animal tissue into humans.

Professor Pothier indicated that this technique, which until recently had been very promising, would probably come to an end because it entails potential dangers such as the development of new retroviruses (similar to AIDS) which might pose a risk to the general population.

Necessary Reflection

Bishop Pierre Morissette of Baie-Comeau, a member of the COLF board of directors, thanked the participants for a frank and fruitful discussion. "It is important to hold meeting such as this," he said, "where we can come to grips with the fact that society is ill prepared to face the challenges involved with the rapid developments in biotechnology." It was also confirmed that the sixth COLF seminar is to be held in 2004.

This annual forum is organized by COLF to promote debate on ethical and moral challenges resulting from the development of new technologies and to provide an exchange between ethicists and scientists.