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"UNESCO INTERNATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE"
UNESCO NEWSLETTER

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR UNESCO
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One of the most interesting of the many bodies established by UNESCO is the International Bioethics Committee (IBC). Its members include judges, philosophers, scientists and bioethical experts. The President of Madam Noelle Lenoir, a member of the Constitutional Council of France. Another member is HE Mohammed Bedjaoui, President of the International Court of Justice. An Australian member is Justice Michael Kirby of the High Court (Honorary Member of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO). Justice Kirby is an old hand in UNESCO. He participated in the general conference in 1983, has taken part in UNESCO expert groups on the rights of peoples in international law and is a member of the Jury for the Award of the UNESCO Prize for the Teaching of Human Rights.

The most important activity of the IBC at the moment is the preparation of a *Preliminary Draft for a Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights*. This document has been more than two years in the making. It addresses some aspects of the acute ethical and legal dilemmas which arise out of scientific research on the human genome. It was examined by

a Legal Commission of the IBC in Paris in December 1996, which Justice Kirby attended. In July 1997 it was examined by government experts. It is expected to be presented to the General Conference later in 1997.

The scheme of the *Preliminary Draft* deals with a number of general propositions. Thus, it asserts that the human genome is the common heritage of humanity. These general statements are followed up with articles dealing with rules to govern research on the human genome, the rights of the persons concerned, the conditions for the exercise of scientific activity in relation to the genome and various duties of cooperation in relation to genomic research as well as specific propositions on the promotion and implementation of the *Declaration* once adopted. A key provision is Article 5 which requires that "no research or applications should be allowed to prevail over the respect for human dignity and human rights in particular in the fields of biology and genetics". Article 6 insists on prior free and informed consent of persons involved in such research. Article 8 requires that the research be treated confidentially.

The work of the IBC in this project illustrates once again how UNESCO plays. Several members of the IBC are also, like Justice Kirby, members of the Ethics Committee of the Human Genome Organisation (HUGO). This is the scientific body coordinating the Human Genome Project - the largest cooperative scientific project in history. Its objective is, within ten years, to

map the human genome. The product will be the encyclopaedia of medicine for the next millennium.

Although Justice Kirby is serving on the IBC in a personal capacity, he has regularly briefed Australian officials. With the help of the National Commission, a consultative group has been established to assist him. A leading member of that group is Professor Donald Chalmers of the University of Tasmania. He is the Chairman of the Australian Ethics Committee and a noted expert on bioethical concerns.

This is therefore another area where Australia and UNESCO are working cooperatively at the cutting edge of science and society.