

Visiting scientist urges caution as end of GE moratorium looms

Professor Terje Traavik, a virologist and Scientific Director of the Norwegian Institute of Gene Ecology, is urging New Zealand to take a precautionary approach towards genetic engineering.

Having worked in the field of genetic engineering for more than 20 years, Professor Traavik is convinced that more scientific studies are needed before we can understand the risks associated with the release of genetically engineered organisms into the environment.

Professor Traavik is visiting New Zealand to further develop collaborative research and capacity-building programmes with the New Zealand Institute of Gene Ecology, based at Canterbury University.

On Tuesday Professor Traavik gave a public lecture titled "Absence of evidence is not evidence of the absence of risk in genetic engineering". The talk reflected Professor Traavik's view that genetic engineering should not proceed unchecked simply because scientific studies have not yet definitely proven that GE techniques and products are dangerous.

"Absence of evidence may be due to many different things. No studies may have been done, or studies that have been done may be interpreted in the wrong way or may be used to draw conclusions

that aren't justified. Nobody really asks about these things."

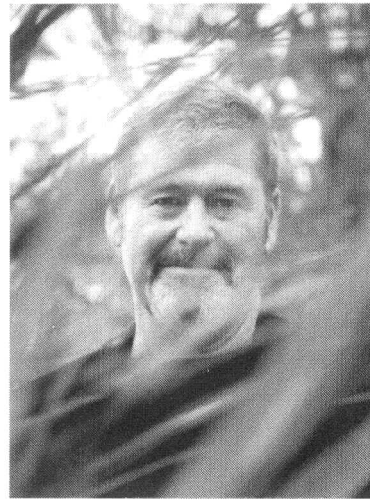
The Precautionary Principle may be particularly important in the case of genetic engineering, Professor Traavik said, because once transgenic material is released into the environment, it is too late to prevent its spread. "Once you have released something that is self-replicating, you cannot recall it."

He believes that moratoriums are a useful way to "put on hold" activities that are suspected to be dangerous until society as a whole can decide whether the risks are acceptable.

"A moratorium under the Precautionary Principle is something that may last two years or 100 years, because it is not up to the experts, but up to society to decide when safe is safe enough."

One reason that research on the risks of GE is scant is that few scientific institutions today are publicly-funded and independent of corporate interests, a gap that both the Norwegian and New Zealand Institutes of Gene Ecology hope to fill.

And not only are the institutes unique among scientific institutions in being "absolutely independent", they also have a unique – and ambitious – goal: to make science that is truly "holistic" and multi-disciplinary. Both institutes have staff from a wide range of



Professor Terje Traavik

disciplines, including molecular biology, ecology, bioethics, philosophy and the social sciences.

The New Zealand Institute of Gene Ecology was established in 2001, after Associate Professor Jack Heinemann (Biological Sciences) visited the Norwegian Institute and was inspired to create a similar independent research organisation here in New Zealand.

The Norwegian and New Zealand institutes operate according to the same principles and work closely together.

"It wouldn't have been possible to reach the goals that we have without this collaboration. So far it's been a win-win situation," said Professor Traavik.

The institutes are collaborating both on research projects on

genetic engineering and also on a capacity-building programme on GE safety. This programme is tailored to the needs of the Third World, but is also attracting interest from certain groups within First World countries.

"We want governments of the Third World to have the same choices, because they know the spectrum of risks that they can ask about. But so-called First World countries also have real gaps in their own capacity to deal with these issues and they may be less willing to acknowledge that," said Professor Heinemann.

"We've gotten a good response from First World countries but only from certain groups, for example indigenous groups and certain socio-economic groups."

For Professor Traavik, the First World's largely reckless approach to genetic engineering only highlights a more fundamental flaw in the way that Western science operates today.

"These countries are so over-developed that they have forgotten what science is all about. It's funny to be in meetings where people are lifting their eyebrows disapprovingly when you talk about the science of 'what if', because all science should be 'what if'. Science should be about using knowledge to attack the unknown," said Professor Traavik.

Laura Sessions



Old friends gather for Warwick House reunion

In spite of relatively short notice, 20 former housemen from the final two years of Warwick House (1972-3) gathered for a weekend of nostalgia, to relive some of the great times and friendships forged 30 years ago. Including partners, 33 attended the events of 26-8 September to commemorate their time at one of the University's older halls of residence, established in 1961.

Reunion organiser Richard Howarth said that without a doubt, the highlight of the weekend was the Saturday night dinner at the Hurst Seager Room of the Christchurch Arts Centre.



Thirty years on Warwick Housemen gather on the front steps of their old hall of residence.

"Modelled on the original house dinners – but with a marked upgrade in food quality and presentation – the event conjured up an almost uncanny return of the old house spirit!" Those present were delighted to find that, as penned poignantly in the Visitor's Book, "the ravages of time are only skin deep", he said.

Two of the events were held in the original building, which retains its authentic turn-of-the-nineteenth century charm as the Windsor Hotel Bed & Breakfast at 56 Armagh Street. Mr Howarth and team are excitedly anticipating a larger scale reunion to coincide with the 100th birthday of this famous Cranmer Square icon in 2007.

Photo by Duncan Shaw-Brown, C&D