DNA research statutes drafted

By Sophie Lukashok

The Massachusetts Public Health Association held a conference on "Genetic Engineering and Public Health" Friday, Sept. 25 to promote the public with a draft model of legislation regulating the usage of genetic engineering in research and industry.

At the conference, the Massachusetts Public Health Association presented the draft of the ordinance to professionals involved in all aspects of genetic engineering. They further hope to obtain feedback to better legislate the ordinance. It is necessary that the ordinance be amended so that it can provide the most favorable conditions for both the community and industry. The final model ordinance will be ready in November.

The MIT community was represented by Jonathan King, a professor of microbiology, who discussed the public health issue, and by David Houssman, from the MIT Center for Cancer Research, who represented academia at the panel discussion.

The first genetic engineering and Public Health conference was held last year, when the communities of Cambridge, Newton, and Somerville, and Newton saw genetic engineering companies settle in their midst. The communities expressed skepticism as to whether genetic manipulation could be done safely. There has been legislation to regulate the industry; however, it has been carried out in an uncoordinated and chaotic fashion. After the National Institutes of Health dissolved its committee on genetic engineering, regulation began drifting into an even greater state of confusion. Furthermore, companies involved in genetic engineering are not required to follow NIH guidelines and only follow them voluntarily. As a result, the community and industry both need to come to a consensus and establish a uniform code of standards protecting the workers and the community. The NIH therefore appointed a subcommittee to the Massachusetts Public Health Association to draft a piece of legislation which would meet these needs.

The model draft encompasses codes of safety concerning research and industrial facilities, work practices, administration, environmental protection, etc. It needs monitoring, registration and permits, and enforcement and amendment provisions. The ordinance defines the difference between research and industrial forms of genetic engineering. It also specifies the rules by which facilities must contain and dispose of their organisms. It requires all institutions to keep a log book open to inspection, and to establish a biosafety committee whose function is to ensure that all safety procedures are followed. The ordinance demands that all employees (including janitors, administrative personnel, etc.) involved in DNA technology have regular medical examinations; in addition, the safety officers must record all sickness causing employees to be absent for four days or more.

Under the ordinance, the site of a genetic engineering facility must be approved by the local board of health, and a permit specifying the volume and procedures of the project must be issued. This permit will be renewed annually once the facility has passed inspection. The ordinance enforces NIH guidelines of prohibited experiments and enforces specific physical containment laboratory designs.

Bill may restrict int'l info flow

By Lerri Bill

H.R. 109, a bill presently in the House of Representatives which attempts to amend the Arms Export Control Act may permanently affect research and learning at MIT.

If passed, the bill would give the Secretaries of Defense, State, and Energy the power to regulate any information released from the United States munitions list, according to the bill's sponsor Charles E. Bennett (D-Fla.). This ability would extend to limiting access to knowledge not harmful to US security.

At MIT, the Committee on the Changing Nature of Information, has been formed, to explore how export controls affect research at MIT.

Included in the jurisdiction of H.R. 109 is control over materials which could potentially be used by other countries to their technological advantage. Dr. Louis Menard 3d of the Provost's office feels that this bill would limit the ability of MIT international students to participate in many types of research. Bennett has indicated that his intention was not to limit freedom of speech, but rather to improve the confidentiality of military matters.

H.R. 109 was first introduced in Congress on January 5, 1981. Currently the bill has received no Executive comment. It has been introduced into the Subcommittees on International Security and Nonproliferation and of Special Events for room 302 on Tuesday, Oct. 11 from 7-9 PM, we will be hosting a company presentation. Please plan to attend! Check with your Office of Special Events for room 302 on Tuesday, Oct. 11 from 7-9 PM, we will be hosting a company presentation.