Bok discusses genetic research

By Ron Norman

Derck C. Bok, president of Harvard University, discussed the issue of genetic research in universities at the Cambridge Forum Wednesday.

Bok's lecture, entitled, "Does biotechnological research endanger universities?" supported genetic research, stressing that the research can be useful if the development is controlled. The research, Bok said, can be applied to present-day problems.

Examples of this usefulness, Bok maintained, could include the development of interferon as a reliable cancer-fighting drug, and the elimination of genetic defects.

Bok favored informing the public of new developments and research. This communication, he implied, is necessary to maintain a safe and healthy relationship between the public and universities.

Along with this open policy, however, Bok claimed the patent system remains useful so information can be effectively translated into goods and services.

Much of the funding for genetic research comes from government grants, explained Bok. A common problem, therefore, is with public demand for tangible applications from the research.

Universities must "struggle" to find practical applications for biological research, Bok said, including patent programs, bilateral agreements with companies, and direct consultation between professors and companies. Direct consultation agreements may cause problems, however.

"Ted Cohen, education writer for The Boston Globe, asked Bok if such agreements could influence curriculum, utilize personal financial agreements as a probation area. These difficulties, Cohen said, could precipitate curricular changes to attract more private grant money. Also, professors having direct consultation agreements with private companies may sacrifice educational standards to economic considerations, the said.

These situations, Bok responded, will not pose serious problems, explaining that company grants comprise only a small portion of university budgets, and little money is made from patent programs. Universities must be careful, however, not to hold professors' loyalties in education, he added.

The initial safety of genetic research is the university's responsibility, Bok maintained, but the government, society, the professor and the university are responsible for its final outcome.