Students Discuss Ethical Issues At Human Genome Conference

By Charu Chaudhry

Students, scientists, and government officials convened at MIT last weekend for the first Human Genome Project Conference.

The student-run conference was held to improve understanding of the social and ethical issues raised by human genome research and to formulate policy solutions, said Benjamin Sun, the director of the HGPC.

Uzma Ahmed, a conference staff member, said, "What was remarkable about the conference was that the participants came from such diverse backgrounds, ranging from high school and college students to professionals in specialized fields related to the issues. It was striking to see how a common interest—the responsible use of genetic information that comes out of the HGP—can bring so many people together."

Most of the participants were college students.

The Human Genome Project, started in 1991, aims to map all human genes and identify the DNA base pairs that comprise each of these mapped genes. There are over 3 billion DNA base pairs in the human genome.

The HGP allocates funds to consider the problems raised by its research. With a budget of $5 billion, the project has the "largest biomedical ethics program in the country and probably the world," said Nancy Wexler, chair of the National Center for Human Genome Research's Committee on Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues (ELSI).

Conference featured workgroups

Student participants were organized in different workgroup sessions to discuss the issues, learn policy-making, and formulate potential solutions to the legal, social, economic, and political challenges raised by the HGP.

The workgroups addressed issues such as: patenting and commercialization, scientific responsibility, reproductive rights and pre-natal testing, eugenics, privacy, genetic discrimination, and genetic testing.

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