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Will Society Be Prepared?

New information is being obtained in the field of biochemical genetics at an extremely rapid rate. Thus far, this knowledge has had relatively little effect upon man. More information must be obtained before practical application will be possible, and the technical problems that must be overcome are formidable. However, when these obstacles have been removed this knowledge will greatly influence man's future, for man then will have the power to shape his own biologic destiny. Such power can be used wisely or unwisely, for the betterment or detriment of mankind.

Salvador Luria has said: "the progress of science is so rapid that it creates an imbalance between the power it places in the hands of man and the social conditions in which this power is exerted. Then neither warnings of scientists, nor breadth of public information, nor wisdom of citizens may compensate for inadequacies of the institutional framework to cope with the new situations."

The public understands to some extent the recent developments in biochemical genetics, but has only a vague notion of what may be expected in the future, in spite of the efforts of many scientists to inform the public about probable future developments.

Where do we stand today? The genetic language now is known, and it seems clear that most, if not all, forms of life on this planet use the same language, with minor variations. Simple genetic messages now can be synthesized chemically. Genetic surgery, applied to microorganisms, is a reality. Genes can be prepared from one strain of bacteria and inserted into another, which is then changed genetically. Such changes are inheritable. Thus far, it has not been possible to program mammalian cells in this way.

What may be expected in the future? Short but meaningful genetic messages will be synthesized chemically. Since the instructions will be written in the language which cells understand, the messages will be used to program cells. Cells will carry out the instructions, and the program may even be inherited. I don't know how long it will take before it will be possible to program cells with chemically synthesized messages. Certainly the experimental obstacles are formidable. However, I have little doubt that the obstacles eventually will be overcome. The only question is when. My guess is that cells will be programmed with synthetic messages within 25 years. If efforts along those lines were intensified, bacteria might be programmed within 5 years.

The point which deserves special emphasis is that man may be able to program his own cells with synthetic information long before he will be able to assess adequately the long-term consequences of such alterations, long before he will be able to formulate goals, and long before he can resolve the ethical and moral problems which will be raised. When man becomes capable of instructing his own cells, he must refrain from doing so until he has sufficient wisdom to use this knowledge for the benefit of mankind. I state this problem well in advance of the need to resolve it, because decisions concerning the application of this knowledge must ultimately be made by society, and only an informed society can make such decisions wisely.—MARSHALL W. NIRENBERG, *National Heart Institute*

This editorial is adapted from remarks made in accepting the Research Corporation's 1966 award.