BIOMEDICAL ETHICS

Italian Committee Loses Its Balance

TRIESTE—Italy's national bioethics committee meets today for the first time since ex–Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi plunged it into controversy last month. He ousted the lay wing of the committee, moving aside almost a quarter of its 46 members and replacing them with hard-line Catholics. The changes to the committee prompted a spate of resignations, including that of its honorary chair, Rita Levi-Montalcini, the 1986 Nobel laureate for medicine. The new committee will draft a letter today asking Levi-Montalcini and two colleagues to retract their resignations.

Resigned. Rita Levi-Montalcini, former committee chair.

The upheaval has come just as the committee—which advises the government on legislation dealing with biomedical ethics, including research issues—is about to debate abortion. Abortion is legal in Italy, but the Catholic church would like to change the law. Some of those members who have lost their seats believe they have been cleared away to ease this debate for the Catholics.

The committee's membership was up for renewal at the end of 1994, but Berlusconi chose to make the changes on 16 December, days before he resigned as prime minister following allegations of corruption in his business affairs. As well as decimating the lay wing of the committee, Berlusconi also lengthened the term of office from 2 to 4 years. Those removed from the committee include Ettore Cittadini from Palermo, a noted fertility expert whose work led to the birth of Italy's first test-tube baby, and Carlo Flamigni, a gynecologist at the University of Bologna acclaimed for his work on pregnancy in advanced menopausal women. "Just as we were getting off the ground ... the purge has come—out with the nonaligned, in with the hard-core Catholics," says Flamigni.

Following the changes of membership, one of the two committee vice chairs, Giovanni Berlinguer, professor of occupational health at La Sapienza University in Rome and a leading member of the opposition Democratic Left party, resigned along with Eugenio Lecaldano, lecturer in history of moral doctrine at La Sapienza. "The era of pluralism is over," Lecaldano says.

Two days later, Levi-Montalcini, a prominent figure in Italy's biomedical community, also resigned. Levi-Montalcini says the issue for her is not so much Catholics versus non-Catholics, but rather the fact that the resulting committee has lost its balance of viewpoints. She was also critical of the lack of progress in developing guidelines governing sensitive areas of biomedical research. "In the most advanced European countries, principles widely agreed upon regarding these issues have been adopted ... and made into precise laws. Here, we start from scratch every time. In the absence of laws, chaos reigns."

Berlusconi's move prompted a national political furor. Giovanna Melandri, a member of Parliament for the Democratic Alliance, put forward a law this month that would give members of Parliament, rather than the prime minister, the task of choosing committee members in the future.

Catholic members of the committee insist that the complaints are coming come from left wingers whose political influence is waning. Angelo Fiori, head of forensic medicine at Rome's Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and an editor of the journal *Medicina e Morale*, was appointed as a vice chair. "The reason why the issue is political is that this committee has influence on law," he explains.

Even the faint hope that the decree might be rescinded by a more liberal government now looks remote with the nomination as prime minister last week of Lamberto Dini, from Berlusconi's Forza Italia party. "The only change possible is that new members may be added," Fiori says.

–Susan Biggin

Susan Biggin is a writer in Trieste, Italy.

BIOTECH REGULATIONS

Germany Loosens Some Red Tape

BERLIN—Responding to complaints that safety regulations are stifling genetic engineering research, the German government last week moved to trim some of the red tape that has ensnared scientists and led some biotech businesses to move their genetic research abroad.

German scientists say the changes are in the right direction, but many complain that they do not go far enough in easing rules that have hampered or delayed research using recombinant organisms. "The regulations are now tolerable. But I would not call them good," commented Harald zur Hausen, director of the German Cancer Research Center in Heidelberg. "I still hope more changes can be made."

German biologists have been sweating for years under the burdens imposed by the comprehensive "gene technology law," which was passed in 1990 during a time of public suspicion about potentially harmful effects of genetic engineering. The initially harsh implementation of the law's provisions created what some researchers decried as a "bureaucratic nightmare" for setting up new labs and getting approval for experiments involving even harmless organisms (*Science*, 31 January 1992, p. 524).

The first concrete sign that the government was sympathetic to the researchers' concerns came in November 1993, when it modified some aspects of the law and the way it was being administered. Last week's changes, announced on 11 January by the cabinet in Bonn, would set up more flexible regulations in some areas, including:

- Making it easier for the government to downgrade, or otherwise reassess, the risk classifications for organisms used in research. That should make regulators more responsive to some new research proposals.
- Relaxing requirements that all genetic engineering be led by researchers who specialize in such work.
- Clarifying some rules on the handling of waste from research and production involving gene technology.

Health ministry officials say that further revisions await expected changes in European Union regulations on biotechnology.

Some experts were unimpressed by the changes, however. They "will have only a minor effect on university research," says Willi Siller, the biological safety officer for the University of Heidelberg. Nevertheless, Siller says Germany's genetic-engineering bureaucracy has become more reasonable over the past year, adopting a more enlightened attitude toward the research and regulations. "Clearly, there has been a good change in the behavior of German authorities in this field," Siller says.

While zur Hausen agrees that some improvements have been made, he contends that the German government should do more to foster aggressive genetic engineering research. "For scientists, this month's changes are minor. But for businesses involved in gene technology, the revisions are helpful. Let's hope for further improvements."

–Robert L. Koenig

Robert L. Koenig is a writer in Berlin.