

SWITZERLAND

Voters Reject Antigenetics Initiative

BERN—Swiss biological scientists were partying this week after a nationwide referendum rejected by a surprisingly strong 2-to-1 margin a proposal to ban research in Switzerland involving transgenic animals and the patenting of genetically modified organisms. The vote capped an unprecedented 2-year debate over the benefits and potential threats of transgenic research.

"Scientists made a difference in this campaign by getting out of their labs and establishing a dialogue with the Swiss people," says Heidi Diggelmann, a University of Lausanne virologist who is also head of the Swiss National Science Foundation's Research Council. "We now want to continue improving that relationship between Swiss science and society." After the polls closed last Sunday evening, Diggelmann cooked barbecue at her home for the scientists and staffers at her Institute of Microbiology who had worked tirelessly to help defeat the initiative. Immunologist Hans Hengartner, who co-directs the University of Zurich's Institute for Experimental Immunology, also threw a party for his researchers. "This is great news for young scientists in Switzerland," he says. The vote showed that "Swiss people did not respond well to the scare tactics used by the initiative's sponsors. In the end, what counted the most was objective information."

The final tally was 1.25 million against (66.7%) and 624,752 in favor of the so-called "Gene Protection Initiative"—with about 41% of Switzerland's electorate turning out to vote. To become part of the Swiss constitution, the initiative would have had to have been approved by a majority of voters, as well as by a majority of the country's 26 cantons, or states. In the end, not one of the cantons supported the initiative, and the French-speaking cantons rejected it by the widest margin. The decisive defeat is expected to prevent an exodus of Swiss molecular biologists.

Sunday's vote ended an intense public campaign by Swiss biologists and Swiss-based pharmaceutical companies to convince the at-times-skeptical public that transgenic laboratory animals are essential to biomedical research and that genetic engineering can provide benefits without posing a serious threat to the environment. Last month, for example, some 3000 scientists and supporters marched through the streets of Zurich; four of Switzerland's five living Nobel Prize winners held a news conference to oppose the initiative; and scientists wrote newspaper columns and ap-

peared at public forums across the country to explain the nature of transgenic research.

This campaign has created a momentum among researchers and government agencies to strengthen the dialogue with the public on key issues of research ethics. The government



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recently formed a bioethics commission and is moving to establish a foundation to promote better relations between science and the public. In addition, the Parliament is expected to give final approval early next year to a legislative package, called "Gene-Lex," that aims to plug gaps in current laws governing transgenic research, in a way that is acceptable to most researchers.

"We have learned through this campaign that it is best to be as open as possible about your research and to let people know that there are inherent controls in science that prevent abuses," says Richard Braun, a microbiologist who chairs the Gen Suisse foundation in Bern, which has worked to promote better public understanding of biotechnology. "Now, even with this decisive vote, scientists cannot withdraw back into an ivory tower. We have to keep

up this dialogue with the public." That may be especially important because proponents of the initiative—a diverse coalition of environmental, animal-rights, and political groups that collected 111,000 signatures to bring the proposal to a vote—may develop another initiative with a different focus, says Florianne Koechlin, a leader of the proponents. Although supporters were disappointed by the vote, Koechlin says they were pleased that the initiative sparked widespread discussion about bioethics.

Switzerland's powerful pharmaceutical industry, which had worked hard to defeat the initiative, breathed a collective sigh of relief. In a 2-year campaign that cost more than \$10 million, the industry prepared reports on the job losses threatened by the initiative, organized numerous public-information sessions, and blanketed Swiss newspapers and magazines with advertisements. Thomas B. Cueni, who heads the Interpharma group that coordinated industry's effort, says that "the involvement of scientists in this campaign had a tremendous impact on public opinion." He calls the overwhelming margin against the initiative "a strong vote of confidence in Switzerland as a center of excellence in scientific research." That sentiment was shared by university officials. Says physicist Olaf Kübler, president of Zurich's Swiss Federal Institute of Technology: "The scientific community has risen to the challenge and responded to the concerns expressed. The net result, hopefully, is restored trust in what research and academia are doing."

—Robert Koenig

Robert Koenig is a writer in Bern.

RESEARCH FRAUD

Editors Call for Misconduct Watchdog

British journal editors and medical societies are calling for the establishment of a national body to investigate allegations of fraud and other misconduct and promote good research practice. "We have seen enough complaints to warrant action among the whole profession," says Neil Marshall, a spokesperson for Britain's General Medical Council (GMC), responsible for registering doctors.

The call for a fraud-busting body comes from the authors of a report published last week by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), an alliance of journal editors. The GMC will make a similar call in its own report, to be issued later this year. Both organizations, alarmed at the rising number of misconduct accusations and the lack of any mechanism for investigating them, believe that Britain needs a national watchdog body, along the lines of the U.S. Office of Research

Integrity or the Danish national committee for scientific dishonesty. "It should have the power to investigate, which we don't have," says Richard Smith, editor of the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ).

Smith and his colleagues first met 12 months ago to discuss growing concerns about the lack of clear guidelines on how to deal with breaches of research and publication ethics. The group founded COPE, and since then it has heard of numerous dubious studies sent by researchers to medical journals. COPE's first report describes 22 of those cases and what the committee decided should be done about them. "It is the tip of an iceberg," says Smith. "They probably came from 10 editors, but there are 20,000 biomedical journals."

The report lists the wide range of methods unscrupulous authors are now using to get papers published. According to Philip