

## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

As with previous February issues of the Journal this issue contains a retrospective discussion on the developments in bioethics and health law over the past year. This year Bill Atkin of Victoria University's Faculty of Law and Sandy Elkin of the Bioethics Centre, University of Otago, give their account of the issues raised in 2003.

Much of the remaining material in this issue was presented at the New Zealand Bioethics Conference held in Dunedin in February 2004. The theme of the conference was ethics and emerging biotechnologies. Given the expansion in the development of biotechnologies in recent years this was an important and timely topic for the conference. The growth in biotechnologies brings with it a number of interesting ethical questions and challenges. These include such questions as what it is to be human, and who owns genetic information, to name just a couple. The sheer size of some of these questions along with the rapid and somewhat unanticipated developments, as viewed by those outside of science, makes setting policy in these areas a particularly difficult task. However, the lack of coordinated policies in some of these areas means ethics committees responding to research proposals submitted by scientists are making one-off decisions. The two opening addresses to the conference discussed exactly these issues. Professor Donald Evans, Director of the Bioethics Centre, University of Otago, provides a summary of the difficult questions that are raised by biotechnology and the challenges for ethics committees operating in a 'policy

vacuum'. In the other opening address Sir Paul Reeves, Chair of the Bioethics Council discusses the role and place of the Bioethics Council. The Council is charged with the task of promoting community dialogue on biotechnology and advising the Government on the cultural, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of biotechnology. In order to develop a coordinated policy in response to biotechnology there are some important steps that must be taken in obtaining the perspectives of community members. The Bioethics Council have begun the work of taking us through these steps, and while there is no doubt that this process will take time, hopefully it will result in a more robust and resilient set of policies grounded in, and owned by the community.

Any worthwhile public policy on biotechnologies requires good dialogue with both scientists and clinicians, and in order to respond the public need to know what biotechnologies can offer. This requires effective engagement with scientists and clinicians about what is currently going on, and what is becoming possible. Scientists and clinicians have a duty to inform people of new developments, to provide information about what they mean, the possibilities they open up, and also their own ethical qualms about implementation. In an effort to create worthwhile dialogue between science and ethics the Bioethics Conference organisers asked a number of scientists and clinicians to present their research and to open the discussion on ethical matters with issues from their own particular perspective. This format provided an opportunity

for the discussion to be framed by the scientist/clinician, ensuring the ethical debate that followed was based in the work of scientists and clinicians.

Professor Gareth Jones, an anatomist and ethicist, presented a paper (written jointly with Cindy Towns) on the public policy options for the use of stem cells in research. This paper has been selected for publication in this issue along with a response from Dr Simon Clarke of the Philosophy Department of Canterbury University who expands on some of the author's points. We anticipate that there will be further papers from the conference published in forthcoming issues of the *New Zealand Bioethics Journal*.

### **Changes for the NZBJ**

The *New Zealand Bioethics Journal* is undergoing some exciting developments. The Editorial Board of the journal has recently decided to collaborate with the Australasian Bioethics Association (ABA) to produce a new international journal of Bioethics. Both the ABA and the *NZBJ* share a vision for bioethics as a diverse and interdisciplinary discourse, which is open to a wide variety of perspectives. The new journal will explore the ethical, social and cultural issues that impact

upon health care provision and practice.

### **What might NZBJ readers expect?**

The new journal will build on the existing foundations laid down by the *NZBJ*. This means we will be retaining many of the regular features of the *NZBJ* but also adding others to reflect the expanded scope of the new journal. There is a strong commitment to maintain and build on the quality that already exists in the *NZBJ* and peer review of articles will continue to be central. There is also a commitment from the group to keep prices as low as possible to encourage a wide readership and keep the conversation on bioethics accessible to as many as possible.

Negotiations are currently underway between the two parties to finalise the administrative matters of the new journal. Such details as how the journal might look and what it will be called have not yet been decided. If any reader would like to offer a name that reflects the collaboration and scope of the new journal, please send them to the editor. It is anticipated that the new journal will be launched later this year. All subscribers to the *NZBJ* will be notified of the proposed changes in the coming months.