

Book Review

Attitudes to Genetic Engineering

by Darryl R.J. Macer,
Eubios Ethics Institute, Christchurch
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Human Genome Research and Society,
Norio Fukiki, Darryl R.J. Macer, Eds,
Eubios Ethics Institute, Christchurch
1992

R F Mueller,
Dept of Paediatrics, University of Otago
Dept of Clinical Genetics, The General
Infirmery at Leeds, Leeds, UK

These two books were published concurrently from the Eubios Ethics Institute which is based in Christchurch and Tsukuba, Japan. As stated in the preface page of the texts, the Eubios Ethics Institute is "a nonprofit group that aims to stimulate the discussion of ethical issues, and how we may use new technology in ways consistent with 'good life'".

The first text is printed in both English and Japanese with each starting from one end of the book. This is much more user friendly than most two language documents or books I have met before where the different language versions are on facing pages. The contents consist of a review by the author of a survey of the attitudes of members of different groups of Japanese society (lay, teachers, scientists, etc) to present and likely developments in genetic engineering, comparing their responses with similar types of surveys previously done in populations of other countries by other authors.

After a brief first chapter introducing some concepts and terms in bioethics and a second chapter on the samples and methods of the survey, the following six chapters present the results of the survey in the main areas of Science and Technology, Genetic Manipulation, Economic Issues, Genetic Manipulated Organisms, Genetic Screening and Gene Therapy, and Scientists and Education. The final chapter consists of Conclusions and Recommendations, with the appendix containing the questionnaire used in the survey. The latter included both limited-choice responses (strongly disagree, disagree etc) as well as opportunities for "freefield" responses.

There is a wealth of data from the survey which is presented in tabular, graphical and descriptive form which is almost overwhelming. While the reasons the author provides for the varying attitudes, both between the different groups of Japanese society as well as with similar groups from surveys carried out in other countries, are interesting speculation, I am not certain of the validity of some of those inferences in the absence of further information about the groups being surveyed. On occasion the author veers into providing personal opinions, for example about the apparent profusion of roadside billboards in Japan!

The second book is a publication of the Proceedings of the Second International Bioethics Seminar in Fukui on the 20-21 March, 1992. The papers presented by scientists from Japan and abroad include both reviews of current scientific progress as well as social, legal and ethical problems in the field of the human genome research.

I found of particular interest, and potential concern, the papers by authors from Japan, Korea and China who work in the field of Medical or Clinical Genetics, in which developments of this technology are already in use. How members of various societies view individuals with mental and/or physical handicap or disability is often attributed to be a consequence of societal differences in culture and religion, but from the information presented in these proceedings, often appeared to be a result of lack of information and/or ignorance of the public in general.

Some of the papers in this book suffer, particularly the papers by the Japanese scientific authors, from lack of clarity and logic in the presentation, perhaps a consequence of the translation of the text into English. This could, perhaps, have been helped by having the English translation reviewed by an editor with English as his/her first language and with an appropriate scientific background in the field.

Both these texts appear to be the product of desk-top publishing, which given the date of the proceedings and the receipt of the book for review three

months later, clearly minimises the delay in publication time (and probably costs). There is however, a price to pay both in the number of typographical errors and the clarity and quality of the layout.

Other books cover in more detail the bioethical considerations of human genome research and might be a preferred single choice of text. But I can only agree with the stated aim of the Eubios Ethics Institute and hope that publication of such texts will further precipitate discussion. Governments and members of all parts of society in all countries need help to face the ethical choices they will have to make both as individuals and as members of a community before we are overwhelmed with developments in this area of science.