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Potential Biohazards of Recombinant DNA Molecules

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## LETTERS

### Potential Biohazards of Recombinant DNA Molecules

Recent advances in techniques for the isolation and rejoining of segments of DNA now permit construction of biologically active recombinant DNA molecules *in vitro*. For example, DNA restriction endonucleases, which generate DNA fragments containing cohesive ends especially suitable for rejoining, have been used to create new types of biologically functional bacterial plasmids carrying antibiotic resistance markers (1) and to link *Xenopus laevis* ribosomal DNA to DNA from a bacterial plasmid. This latter recombinant plasmid has been shown to replicate stably in *Escherichia coli* where it synthesizes RNA that is complementary to *X. laevis* ribosomal DNA (2). Similarly, segments of *Drosophila* chromosomal DNA have been incorporated into both plasmid and bacteriophage DNA's to yield hybrid molecules that can infect and replicate in *E. coli* (3).

Several groups of scientists are now planning to use this technology to create recombinant DNA's from a variety of other viral, animal, and bacterial sources. Although such experiments are likely to facilitate the solution of important theoretical and practical biological problems, they would also result in the creation of novel types of infectious DNA elements whose biological properties cannot be completely predicted in advance.

There is serious concern that some of these artificial recombinant DNA molecules could prove biologically hazardous. One potential hazard in current experiments derives from the need to use a bacterium like *E. coli* to clone the recombinant DNA molecules and to amplify their number. Strains of *E. coli* commonly reside in the human intestinal tract, and they are capable of exchanging genetic information with other types of bacteria, some of which are pathogenic to man. Thus, new DNA elements introduced into *E. coli* might possibly become widely disseminated among human, bacterial, plant, or animal populations with unpredictable effects.

Concern for these emerging capabilities was raised by scientists attending the 1973 Gordon Research Conference on Nucleic Acids (4), who requested that the National Academy of

Sciences give consideration to these matters. The undersigned members of a committee, acting on behalf of and with the endorsement of the Assembly of Life Sciences of the National Research Council on this matter, propose the following recommendations.

First, and most important, that until the potential hazards of such recombinant DNA molecules have been better evaluated or until adequate methods are developed for preventing their spread, scientists throughout the world join with the members of this committee in voluntarily deferring the following types of experiments.

► *Type 1*: Construction of new, autonomously replicating bacterial plasmids that might result in the introduction of genetic determinants for antibiotic resistance or bacterial toxin formation into bacterial strains that do not at present carry such determinants; or construction of new bacterial plasmids containing combinations of resistance to clinically useful antibiotics unless plasmids containing such combinations of antibiotic resistance determinants already exist in nature.

► *Type 2*: Linkage of all or segments of the DNA's from oncogenic or other animal viruses to autonomously replicating DNA elements such as bacterial plasmids or other viral DNA's. Such recombinant DNA molecules might be more easily disseminated to bacterial populations in humans and other species, and thus possibly increase the incidence of cancer or other diseases.

Second, plans to link fragments of animal DNA's to bacterial plasmid DNA or bacteriophage DNA should be carefully weighed in light of the fact that many types of animal cell DNA's contain sequences common to RNA tumor viruses. Since joining of any foreign DNA to a DNA replication system creates new recombinant DNA molecules whose biological properties cannot be predicted with certainty, such experiments should not be undertaken lightly.

Third, the director of the National Institutes of Health is requested to give immediate consideration to establishing an advisory committee charged with (i) overseeing an experimental program to evaluate the potential biological and ecological hazards of the above types of recombinant DNA molecules; (ii) developing procedures which will

minimize the spread of such molecules within human and other populations; and (iii) devising guidelines to be followed by investigators working with potentially hazardous recombinant DNA molecules.

Fourth, an international meeting of involved scientists from all over the world should be convened early in the coming year to review scientific progress in this area and to further discuss appropriate ways to deal with the potential biohazards of recombinant DNA molecules.

The above recommendations are made with the realization (i) that our concern is based on judgments of potential rather than demonstrated risk since there are few available experimental data on the hazards of such DNA molecules and (ii) that adherence to our major recommendations will entail postponement or possibly abandonment of certain types of scientifically worthwhile experiments. Moreover, we are aware of many theoretical and practical difficulties involved in evaluating the human hazards of such recombinant DNA molecules. Nonetheless, our concern for the possible unfortunate consequences of indiscriminate application of these techniques motivates us to urge all scientists working in this area to join us in agreeing not to initiate experiments of types 1 and 2 above until attempts have been made to evaluate the hazards and some resolution of the outstanding questions has been achieved.

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#### References and Notes

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