22 guidelines set for genetic research

Among practices prohibited: Getting genetic material without consent

By Chang Ai-Lien & Lee Hui Chieh

ETHICAL guidelines that spell out the limits of genetic testing and research here have been accepted by the Government.

The set of 22 guidelines, for example, prohibits obtaining genetic material without people’s consent.

Most are already professional best practices which come under the umbrella of existing regulations by the Health Ministry and the review boards of hospitals and research institutions here.

The Health Ministry will also decide whether new laws are needed.

Researchers who run foul of the guidelines can be stripped of their funding, be suspended from practice and even fined, depending on the severity of the breach.

The report presented yesterday is the result of extensive research by the national Bioethics Advisory Committee into the policies and guidelines used internationally. Locally, feedback was sought from healthcare and government institutions, professional bodies, religious groups and patient-support organisations.

The committee’s chairman Lim Pin said that with more than 800 different genetic tests available for a diverse range of diseases, it is important for testing to be conducted responsibly and ethically.

Noting how you could now get genetic testing kits and services over the Internet, Associate Professor Terry Kaan, from the National University of Singapore’s law faculty, said: “Theoretically, for some tests, all you may need nowadays is a mouth swab or a discarded toothbrush.

“So we have recommended that non-consensual or deceitful taking of human tissues for the purposes of genetic testing should be prohibited.”

The guidelines require such tests to be done by professionals and the labs carrying them out to be accredited.

One other recommendation deals with a technique known as “preimplantation tissue typing”.

This calls for the testing of early embryos created through in-vitro fertilisation before they are implanted.

It not only allows couples to have a healthy child, but also to select one that will be a compatible stem cell donor for a sick older sibling.

The technique will be allowed here, subject to licensing control and a case-by-case review. For example, it will be allowed to prevent serious genetic conditions, but not to select for desired traits or a preferred sex.

Commenting on the case of South Korean cloning pioneer Hwang Woo Suk, who resigned from his official posts after admitting to using human eggs from his own researchers as well as from paid donors in his work, BAC members said that this was an unlikely scenario here.

Prof Lim said: “We have clearly stated that no tissues should be transacted in a commercial sense, be it eggs or bits of liver or skin, even from cadavers.

“If you want to donate, it must be a pure donation.”

Leading researcher Hui Kam Man, the National Cancer Centre’s head of cellular and molecular research, agreed, saying that the guidelines were “not anything out of the line” with those of other countries.

He added: “If there are guidelines, people can have a clearer idea of anything that will be in conflict. They can plan ahead and steer away from potential difficulties.”

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