October 18, 1974

Dr. E.S. Anderson
Enteric Reference Laboratory
Central Public Health Laboratory
Colindale Avenue
London NW9 5HT

Dear Dr. Anderson,

I cannot comment about the aired version of the BBC Controversy programme because I have not seen it. There have been second- and third-hand comments about it (mostly favorable). My experience in the past is that as participants in such ventures we're never satisfied of the result and that others are less critical. I knew the live tape made on September 2 was going to be edited to run to about 80-90 minutes, so something had to be cut. I wonder whether we would have been any more successful in trying to condense 130 minutes of discussion into 80-90 minutes of broadcast. I am, of course, sorry that you were not satisified with the outcome; very likely if I saw the final product, I would have found things not to my liking.

I was informed by Professor Glover about the IAMS committee to monitor the hybrid plasmid field and I'm delighted that you have accepted to become a member. Professor Glover asked me to join the group but this business has already made such inroads in my time that I have to decline. Organizing the Asilomar meeting is enough of a job!

The Asilomar meeting concerning potential hazards of research on interspecies recombinant DNAs is planned for the days February 24-27. We expect people to arrive on Sunday, February 23 and the meeting to end at noon on February 27. You will be notified later about "helpful hints" concerning transportation to Asilomar and other administrative details.

There are three working groups, composed of four to six people each, in the process of organizing discrete segments of the meeting.

a) Richard Novick and Stanley Falkow lead the group dealing with plasmids and antibiotic resistance, the "natural history" of E. coli infections and transmission of plasmids in vivo.

b) Aaron Shatkin has organized a group dealing with construction of hybrids containing oncogenic virus nucleic acid.

c) Don Brown has put together about five people considering the introduction of eukaryote (plant and animal) DNA into plasmids or phage genomes for the purposes of cloning or production of gene products.

Each group is charged with organizing scientific presentations in their area of responsibility and of formulating propositions concerning biohazards and their resolution for discussion by the Conference participants. By focussing on previously thought through ideas and statements and avoiding emotional reamblings, I hope we can arrive at some reasonable conclusions and recommendations.

The charge to the group dealing with hybrids containing tumor virus DNA was as follows:

"The purpose of the Asilomar meeting is to identify (a) the kinds of experiments one would like to do with joined molecules; (b) the important information that can be obtained with them; (c) the possible risks involved for the investigator and/or others; and (d) the measures that can be employed to test for and minimize the biohazards so that the work can go on.

It is important to provide data on these points (where available) if the meeting is to be a productive one. However, in addition to trying to gather as many facts as possible, some thought should be given to the possible kinds of episodes that could result from exposure to E. coli replicating a viral DNA segment joined to a plasmid. For example, what is the probability that SV40 DNA introduced into the gut via E. coli would infect the brain? Could a herpesvirus DNA fragment, when joined and amplified, establish a latent infection (or induce a malignancy) in man? Is it hazardous to try to identify the region of the Rous provirus that codes for transformation by cloning and amplifying DNA segments joined to plasmids?"

Similar questions are being raised within each subject area and is to be dealt with by each group.

At the end of the meeting we hope to be able to draft some conclusions and recommendations, at least as they reflect the concensus of the conference discussions.

I look forward to seeing you at Asilomar. Until then I remain

Sincerely yours,

Paul Berg

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