

STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER  
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305

DEPARTMENT OF BIOCHEMISTRY

PAUL BERG  
*Willson Professor of Biochemistry*

July 25, 1979

Professor Koch, Chairman  
Federal Committee on Recombinant  
DNA Research

Dear Professor Koch,

I regret that I can not participate in the West German Government hearing on recombinant DNA research that will be held in Bonn during September 19-21. I would have liked to help but other obligations make it extremely difficult for me to be in Bonn during that time.

As you may know I was amongst the first who cautioned against the potential risks associated with indiscriminate and widespread application of recombinant DNA methods. Today, however, I and most scientists who have participated in the analysis and debate of the scientific and public policy issues believe that our initial concerns have, largely, been laid to rest. While a case can be made that some vigilance in performing those experiments is prudent, the bulk of research in this field should, in my view, be relieved of the bureaucratic restraints that now stifle it. The NIH Guidelines that were developed to regulate recombinant DNA research have served their purpose. They educated scientists to the anxieties that were raised and provided advice on how to perform the work safely. There is serious question as to whether Government could or should do more.

Frankly, I am astonished that your government is contemplating legislative action now to control this line of scientific work, particularly at a time when most national scientific bodies are relaxing their restrictions and conceding that no further restrictions or legislative actions are needed. I have enclosed copies of letters I wrote to U.S. Senator Harrison Schmitt and Dr. J. D. Coombes from Great Britain which clarify my position vis à vis legislation for recombinant DNA research as well as other observations on this issue. Also included is a copy of a letter by Senator Schmitt to Science magazine indicating that legislative control of this and other lines of scientific research would be detrimental to our Nation. Needless to say, the considered judgment of the U.S. Congress after extensive hearings and public debate was that formal legislation was unnecessary and possibly damaging; most believe that local monitoring of compliance with The National Institute of Health Guidelines is sufficient. Since the West German system is quite similar to our present system I would argue that that is sufficient for you as well. I believe that legislation to control recombinant DNA would seriously impair progress in this field of science and postpone or even withhold the benefits that would accrue to your country.

7/25/79

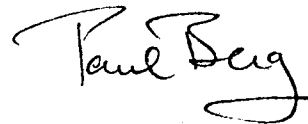
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We are passing through a phase, temporary I hope, in which the rhetoric of pessimism threatens to torpedo the promise of an important scientific breakthrough. It seems that the recombinant DNA issue has revealed, rather than created, an underlying apprehension - an apprehension about probing "the nature of life itself", a questioning of whether certain inquiries at the edge of our knowledge and our ignorance should cease for fear of what we could discover or create. Personally, I reject the philosophical hand-wringing of the Chargaff and Sinsheimer schools and dismiss the politically motivated thrust of J. King's arguments. Instead I prefer Sir Peter Medawar's observation in an essay entitled "The Hope of Progress:."

"If we imagine the evolution of living organisms compressed into a year of cosmic time, then the evolution of man has occupied a day. Only during the past 10-15 minutes of the human day has our life been anything but precarious. We are still beginners and may hope to improve. To deride the hope of progress is the ultimate fatuity, the last word in poverty of spirit and meanness of mind."

Please feel free to use my letter and its enclosures in lieu of my personal testimony to the hearings, if that would be appropriate.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paul Berg". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the typed name "Paul Berg".

PB:vs