

December 10, 1974

Dr. Robert S. Stone, Director
Department of Health, Education and Welfare
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland 20014

Dear Dr. Stone,

Your response, sent to Dr. Philip Handler at the National Academy of Sciences, at the time our report on recombinant DNA molecules was released was admirable. It encouraged my colleagues and me to believe that when called upon, our governmental scientific establishment could act quickly and decisively. That belief was reinforced by the rapidity with which NIH financial support was made available to organize and hold the proposed Asilomar Conference to discuss this issue.

But as you will recall our report also recommended that the director of the National Institutes of Health give immediate consideration to establishing an advisory committee charged with (i) overseeing an experimental program to evaluate the potential biological and ecological hazards of synthetically prepared 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. The action on this matter has been disappointing indeed. It is now nearly five months since the recommendations were sent forward and to my knowledge no committee has been named or approved, much less met to do business. Consequently I am writing to you in the hope that the same spirit that moved you to move so quickly on the financing matter can be brought to bear on expediting the organizing and charging of the above advisory group.

To spur you on let me summarize briefly how the British have responded to the challenge. Almost within the week that Science and Nature carried the report in their pages, the Medical Research Council issued recommendations concerning the continuation and undertaking of experiments involving construction of new recombinant DNAs to all of its laboratories in the U.K. Moreover, a high level committee of eleven distinguished British scientists, under the chairmanship of Lord Ashby, was organized and charged to submit a report before the end of the year with recommendations that could guide such work in Great Britain. That committee has already held extended hearings and is preparing its interim report. Why should we be any less able to respond? Is our system incapable of acting in the same decisive way on an issue which you labeled as urgent?

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I am appealing to you to see to it that our virtual inaction or snail's pace progress is remedied and that the business of naming, approving and defining the mission of this advisory board proceed promptly. I believe that many investigators engaged in research on these matters will interpret the failure of the NIH to exert leadership in this area as a lack of concern or interest on the biohazard question. If there is nothing to show for our effort by the time of the Asilomar Conference (February 24-27, 1975), I fear it will be difficult to persuade scientists to continue with the voluntary suspension of the particularly worrisome experiments.

Respectfully yours,

Paul Berg

PB:af

cc. Leon Jacobs
DeWitt Stetten, Jr.
Philip Handler