

August 24, 1976

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Dear Wally:

I share your concern about obtaining straight forward and honest adherence to the guidelines on recombinant DNA. It is my hope that within the United States, the NIH guidelines will be used, not only by those receiving research support from NIH, but by all who are involved in this research. Further, the activities of international organizations such as EMBO and ICSU as well as the activities in several countries other than the United States suggest that similar, though not identical guidelines will be in force in many places.

In talking with our colleagues here and abroad I have gained the impression that most of them consider the guidelines a serious matter. It is my belief that honest compliance will be widespread. Nevertheless, there are rumors indicating that some scientists take differing views. Because of their lack of agreement with the assessments of potential hazards that are implicit in the guidelines, they may not observe the recommendations. The disregard of the guidelines may, as you mention, be flagrant or covert. And I agree that complex problems may arise, both for junior and senior colleagues of individuals disregarding the established principles.

How to minimize these problems is a difficult question. The recommendation, in the NIH guidelines, that publications include a description of containment measures, can be a very strong pressure for compliance, especially if the Journals are willing to demand such statements. It is my impression that Dr. Frederickson is trying to obtain cooperation from the Journals in this matter. However it is difficult to predict the reactions of the various editors. It is also my belief that as local institutional biohazards committees are established, they too will put the pressure of peers on colleagues, within a given institution. Furthermore, the current tendency of public discussion of this matter to lean toward even more stringent rules than stated in the guidelines will, I think, be a powerful force for compliance.

Rowe Singer  
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At this time I believe that we should give these three factors, as well as the largely favorable attitudes of the scientific community a chance to operate. I am uncomfortable with the mechanism you propose in your letter of 11 August. Institutionalized consideration of rumors, seems to me to invite very serious problems. Among others perhaps most important is the loss of good will and the habits of open discussion that are essential to the progress of science.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts on this. If you want to discuss it further, please give me a call.

Sincerely,

Maxine Singer