May [illegible] please for me.

A Statement

I am informed that the sincerity of my position in the debate over recombinant DNA has been questioned because I have "allowed" recombinant DNA research (and the development of associated facilities) to proceed at Caltech. It is also alleged that I, myself, am engaged in recombinant DNA research.

The introduction of slander and innuendo into this discussion is most unfortunate; while I doubt that facts can ever overtake invective, these are the facts.

Yes, recombinant DNA research is in progress at Caltech. Yes, a P2 level laboratory is in use and a P3 level facility is under construction.

When the NIH Guidelines - which I consider to be sorely inadequate - were issued last June, then, as Chairman of the Division of Biology, I had to decide whether to accept these Guidelines as the rules for Caltech or to seek to prohibit such research on my campus.

I considered the latter option and rejected it on grounds of both principle and practicality.

On principle, as Chairman, I do not have, nor do I believe I should have, the right, merely on the basis of my own inclination, to order a faculty member not to perform a "legal" experiment. I would not want to be in an institution where the chairman had such personal, arbitrary authority; it is antithetic to the collegial ideal. I have the right to attempt to dissuade faculty from performing what I regard as ill-advised experiments and I have exercised that right.

In practice, as long as such research is carried on elsewhere I understand the pressure upon my faculty to do likewise. The power and effectiveness of recombinant DNA techniques are not in question. Caltech has always been in the forefront of genetics and molecular genetics. I will not uni-laterally withdraw the Division of Biology from the community of molecular biologists with the inevitable cost to our research and teaching programs.

Further, while I continue to believe that the present Guidelines expose society to unnecessary and excessive potential hazard, there would be scant reduction of that hazard were such work banned at Caltech while it continued at 40 or 50 other institutions.

This issue simply cannot be resolved on a "local option" basis. Only national - ideally, international - regulations make sense.

The statement that I am personally engaged in recombinant DNA research reflects either a misapprehension or a sorry play on words. We are undertaking studies of recombinant gene combinations between microorganisms which are able to exchange DNA, via plasmids or phage, in Nature. I do not believe that anyone thinks such experiments should be compared to the experiments crossing species barriers to which I have taken exception.

I have also in mind, at some future time, to explore under full containment provisions, the possibility of the use of plant cell tissue culture for recombinant DNA research. Such cultures may offer a valuable alternative, for many purposes, to the unfortunate use of E. coli.

I should add that I personally deplore the introduction of personalities instead of issues into this discussion of recombinant DNA. I regard such actions as an indication of bankruptcy of argument and I will not engage in such. I intend to continue to urge, at the national level, the adoption of more stringent Guidelines for the conduct of recombinant DNA research in order that its benefits may be safely achieved.

Robert L. Sinsheimer
Chairman, Division of Biology
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