International gathering of scientists, ethicists seeks to set standards for future of biotech

Roughly 135 scientists, bioethicists, philosophers, lawyers, and policymakers from 25 countries wrapped up the first-ever global summit to carve out a vision for what the future of biotech should — and, crucially, shouldn't — look like.

It was an unusual venue for a gathering of the world's preeminent scientific community: Atlanta's big brick Tabernacle, an old Baptist church now used mostly as a music venue, and covered in swirling purple and red murals. Those attending the two-day summit — called Biotech and the Ethical Imagination, or BEINGS — were charged with a seemingly insurmountable task: to figure out practical and ethical guidelines for a lot of sticky scientific issues, such as egg donations, stem cell research, gene patents, and bioterrorism.

"Science can only pronounce definitively about things that it can measure," Margaret Atwood, famed science fiction author and one of the event's distinguished faculty members, told BuzzFeed News. "You're getting people from the side of the fuzzily quantifiable values talking to the people who like to be very precise."

According to the event's organizer, Emory bioethicist Paul Wolpe, the idea for BEINGS had been simmering in his head for nearly a decade — well after the cloning of Dolly the sheep and the sequencing of the human genome brought genetics to the forefront of a national conversation.

But the ethics of genetic technology made headlines again just a month ago, when a storm erupted over a Chinese paper describing the first-ever gene editing done on human embryos, raising fears of so-called designer babies. Scientists from across the world published multiple letters of protest in major journals calling for a halt to such research. But as several commenters at the summit noted, "the genie's out of the bottle."

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis. Read full, original post: Does Biotech Need Limits?