

The Asilomar conference and its lessons for the regulation of gene-editing

There is a precedent for establishing internationally agreed-upon limits for new science, though it can be hard to do.

A hundred and fifty scientists and physicians from around the world gathered in February 1975 at the Asilomar conference center near Monterey, California, in what one scientist termed an amazing show of “self denial and social responsibility in the face of strong intellectual temptation” to continue the experiments.

“Asilomar” came to be shorthand for the social responsibility of science. I was one of four nonscientific participants at the meeting, charged with making the scientists aware of how severe societal sanctions would be if some Frankenstein bug escaped a lab and caused harm. So, twenty-five years later, I brought many of the leaders of the original meeting back to Asilomar along with social scientists, historians, government officials and ethicists to discuss whether the outcome from decades earlier would still be possible — or desirable.

The consensus was that the 1975 conference had succeeded only because the organizers had deliberately narrowed the questions under discussion to ones of safety. Yet, as shown by the recent Chinese attempt to change inheritable DNA in human embryos, the line between basic research and clinical applications has virtually disappeared. Beyond health concerns, the application of techniques like Crispr-Cas9 in an attempt to directly “improve” our descendants raises profound ethical and social issues.

A group dominated by scientists is too self-interested and unrepresentative to take on such wide-ranging issues now. Experts can help clarify the issues but policymaking ought to arise from a more democratic process.

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis. Read full, original post: [The Lessons of Asilomar for Today's Science](#)