

STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305

DEPARTMENT OF BIOCHEMISTRY

PAUL BERG
Willson Professor of Biochemistry

July 24, 1978

Dr. J.D. Coombes
Hoechst UK Limited
Walton Manor
Bucks MK7 2AJ

Dear Dr. Coombes,

I am afraid that you have been misinformed about the existence of a statement reflecting the current views of the co-signators of the July 1974 letter concerning the conjectural hazards of recombinant DNA research. No such statement has been issued although we have, from time to time, discussed drafting one; on each occasion when issuing such a statement was considered, we elected discretion as the better part of "valor" and maintained a low profile. However, I do believe that there is a strong shared view amongst us that the concerns we expressed then, have, in the light of what we know today, disappeared. I believe that there is little or no risk associated with most, if not all, recombinant DNA experiments now being done or contemplated. (If you are interested I have enclosed several recent statements I have made to that effect). The risks remain conjectural perhaps even approaching implausibility. The precautions mandated by the NIH Guidelines or GMAG's rules and procedures reflect earlier uncertainties, surely not present day assessments. I think it is difficult to find serious scientists who would support stronger measures; most feel that what we have remains for political and non-scientific reasons. Those of us who signed the 1974 letter did so not because we were convinced of imminent danger or disaster but because we believed the issue needed to be raised so that the scientific community could examine the issue critically and carefully before, not after, proceeding fullspeed ahead.

I was astonished to read that Britain has opted for more stringent controls at a time when the U.S. is proposing revised guidelines that reflect decreased concerns. (The proposed revised NIH Guidelines should be released by August 1). As you can see from the

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enclosed letter to Science informed members of our legislature, national and local, are having second thoughts about legislative approaches to dealing with recombinant DNA experimentation. It's my view that no legislation is warranted and I would bet there will be none.

I believe we have gone through that period, a bit more erratically and foolishly than was warranted; but nevertheless, now, there is overwhelming agreement that the risks are minimal perhaps non-existent, the opportunities dazzling. Consequently, I strongly support that we get on with exploiting these opportunities vigorously and remain alert to any surprises; certainly we should not be erecting political and administrative barriers or bureaucracies that serve no useful purpose.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paul Berg". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name "Paul Berg".

PB:a
Encl.