BREAKING THE CODE

November 2002

Symposium

CENTRE FOR LAW AND GENETICS
OCCASIONAL PAPER No. 5
CONTENTS

SELF REGULATION TO REGULATION: WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP IN GENETIC RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMANS?
DONALD CHALMERS 1

DNA TESTING FOR ALL
RONY DUNCAN & BOB WILLIAMSON 17

GENETIC TESTING OF CHILDREN: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSURANCE
MARGARET OTLOWSKI 24

A DEFENCE OF MOTHERLESS PARENTAGE TESTS
AINSLEY NEWSON 42

GENETICS AND DEPRESSION: ETHICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS
WAYNE HALL, KATHERINE MORLEY & LUCY CARTER 83

PATENTS AND ACCESS TO GENETIC TESTS
DIANNE NICOL 110

PROPERTY LAW AND HUMAN TISSUE – CASE EXAMPLES
IMOGEN GOOLD 138

THEFT OF DNA: SHOULD IT BE A NEW CRIMINAL OFFENCE?
LOANE SKENE 148

THE ETHICS OF THE BUSINESS OF STEM CELL RESEARCH
DAVID RODIN 155

LITIGATING ETHICS
BRENDAN GOGARTY 171

REFORMING FOR THE FUTURE
BRIAN OPESKIN 211

RECENT ADVANCES IN GENETIC RESEARCH
SIMON FOOTE 219
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE CENTRE FOR LAW AND GENETICS WISHES TO THANK:

FOR ONGOING RESEARCH FUNDING AND SUPPORT
THE AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL
THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA
THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

FOR THEIR SPONSORSHIP OF THE SYMPOSIUM
ALLENS ARTHUR ROBINSON
BLAKE DAWSON WALDRON
THOMSON LAWBOOK CO.

FOR PROVIDING THE VENUES AND FACILITIES
THE MURDOCH CHILDRENS RESEARCH INSTITUTE
THE WALTER AND ELIZA HALL INSTITUTE
SELF-REGULATION TO REGULATION: WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP IN GENETIC RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMANS?

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Introduction

The importance of medical research in Australia is undeniable. High quality research informs the quality of the teaching of medicine and health sciences. Equally, high quality research maintains and improves the delivery of high quality medical and health services. In addition, the quality of research is a determinant of how far Australia must rely on overseas research rather than collaborating and participating in the creation of original research. At the time of the Wills Report it was estimated that Australia spent around $700,000,000 on medical research. This is a modest amount in comparison to the total world investment in medical research. On the other hand, the impact of Australian research results significantly exceeds the Australian financial investment in research.

Australian medical research was originally conducted with minimum regulation. After the ratification of the Declaration of Helsinki in 1967, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) introduced a Statement on Human Experimentation based on the Declaration and made ethical approval a condition of funding by the NHMRC. In 1982 a formal system of ethical review was introduced. In 1991 the Statement on Human Experimentation was revised to require monitoring of research by institutions. More significantly, in 1992 the Commonwealth Parliament passed the National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992 (Cth) (the NHMRC Act). The Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC) was established as a peak body

1 The Virtuous Cycle - Working Together for Health and Medical Research, AGPS Canberra 1999.
2 It is estimated that Australia contributes between 1-2% of total funding of medical research internationally.
3 Using the measure of publication in leading Australian journals, the research commission for the Wills Report found that Australian researchers average approximately 2.6% of lead articles in major journals.