Prime Minister

You queried the continued need for GMAG. Mr Carlisle argues that its work is in an area of growing public concern, and that it therefore has a valuable role for at least a couple of years. In this case, there are strong arguments in favour.

Agree to continue for 2 years and to appoint Sir Robert Williams. MH 29/1

FOI 2 years only. not

PRIME MINISTER

GENETIC MANIPULATION ADVISORY GROUP

I have seen the letter of 9 January from your Private Secretary to mine conveying your doubts about the need for GMAG's continued existence.

The Group operates under terms of reference which are at Annex A. You will see from these that the Group's remit includes animals and plants in addition to humans. This alone really rules out a full incorporation of GMAG into the Medical Research Council (MRC). (But, in the interests of economy, the MRC do provide the GMAG's secretariat.)

There is a more powerful argument in favour of keeping GMAG. In the next two years or so progress with the development of genetic manipulation techniques and with their industrial application will continue at a fast pace. So we should expect there to be conflicts between, on the one hand, scientists and industry who tend to chafe at what they see as unnecessary controls, and on the other the general public, Parliament and the trades unions who perceive possible dangers to health. There is a need, therefore, for an impartial, yet expert, central body to offer balanced advice and take balanced decisions. GMAG, with its membership representatives of scientists, employers, employees and the public interest, is acknowledged as expert and seen to be impartial.

There is also an international dimension. We must not get too far out of step with other countries in our controls on genetic manipulation work, or our industry may be put at a disadvantage. An EC draft Recommendation on the Registration of DNA work is going through the Brussels machinery; GMAG's advice will be essential in helping to determine the UK's position on this.

Your Private Secretary's letter mentioned the settled nature of the guidelines. I agree that the statutory framework (the Health and Safety (Genetic Manipulation) Regulations 1978) is unlikely to be much altered. But within that framework there is much scope for changing detailed control procedures by administrative action, and it is over changes of this nature - and there have been several since the 1978 Regulations came into effect - that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) will continue to require expert advice from GMAG.

All this persuades other interested colleagues and me of the need for the continuation of GMAG. I would not wish to suggest that GMAG will carry on in its present form indefinitely: eventually HSE may have built up sufficient internal expertise to be able to take a rather differently constituted GMAG under its wing. But it is needed, at least for the next couple of years, in its present form.

I should be grateful for your approval to the continuation of GMAG and to my appointing Sir Robert Williams as the next Chairman, in accordance with my Private Secretary's letter to yours of 31 December.

I am copying this to the Ministers in charge of the Departments to which your Private Secretary's letter went.

M.C.

MARK CARLISLE
28 January 1981

ANNEX A

TERMS OF REFERENCE OF GMAG

1. To advise:

   (a) those undertaking activities in genetic manipulation, including activities related to animals and plants, and

   (b) others concerned.

2. To undertake a continuing assessment of risks and precautions (and in particular of any new methods of physical or biological containment) and of any newly developed techniques for genetic manipulation and to advise on appropriate action.

3. To maintain appropriate contacts with relevant government departments, the Health and Safety Executive and the Dangerous Pathogens Advisory Group.

4. To maintain records of containment facilities and of the qualifications of Biological Safety Officers.

5. To make available advice on general matters connected with the safety of genetic manipulation, including health monitoring and the training of staff.

6. To submit a report at intervals of not more than a year.

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cc MOD
DHSS
SO
WO
MAFF
CSD

MLPS
Social Services

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

2 February 1981

Dear Mary

The Prime Minister has considered your Secretary of State's further minute of 28 January about the Genetic Manipulation Advisory Group.

She has agreed that the Group should continue in existence for a further two years, and that Sir Robert Williams should take over the chairmanship.

I am sending copies of this letter to David Omand (Ministry of Defence), Mike Tully (Department of Health and Social Security), Geoffrey Robson (Scottish Office), John Craig (Welsh Office), Kate Timms (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) and Geoffrey Green (Civil Service Department).

Yours ever

Mike Pattison

Mrs. Mary Bowden
Department of Education and Science.

YLS