Ethical Issues in Governing Biobanks: Global Perspectives


Storing human tissues to support research has been an important recent advance. This book brings together international views about three aspects of the ethics of storing tissues in biobanks. The 4 editors have involved 5 other experts in writing the 16 chapters.

After an introductory chapter, the first of the 3 parts is a literature review of biobanks and current guidelines, and highlighted 3 unresolved controversies: consent, confidentiality and commercialization. Part 2 describes a qualitative study carried out from 2004 to 2006 which sampled 87 international experts, half from the US, drawn from physicians, researchers, ethicists, lawyers and philosophers. The results are presented as 10 chapters under headings such as “consent issues”, “collective consent”, “anonymization and coding”, each with an introduction and discussion of how the data contributes to current knowledge, and a bibliography.

Part 3 reports a meeting of 18 international scholars, which addressed ownership of samples, intellectual property rights, feedback to participants, disposal, and benefit sharing. The final chapter looks to the future, suggesting that biobanking is becoming normalised with a sample seen to be just another biological sample, and not “the key to every person's essence”, and more widely seen to be a public good. They support the development of common international standards.

A theme throughout the book is the dynamic and ever-changing nature of attitudes and requirements for banking, with this leading to ongoing improvement. Anyone who uses or collects human tissue for research would find this book a useful resource. However, the views reported were from 5 years ago, and there is very little about ethnicity issues, although two New Zealanders were listed as being interviewed in the study, where arguably New Zealand has led the world.

Bridget Robinson
Mackenzie Chair of Cancer Medicine, Department of Medicine, University of Otago, Christchurch; and Medical Oncologist, Canterbury Regional Cancer and Blood Service, Christchurch Hospital, Christchurch