From the Director's Desk

Genetically Enhancing Athletes?

by C. Ben Mitchell

Readers of both the academic and popular literature in bioethics will be well aware that genetic and other forms of so-called human enhancement are clearly on the drawing board. No one knows how long it will take to develop these technologies, but they are most certainly coming. Already, of course, through the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis, human embryos are screened for undesirable genetic traits, and embryos with those traits are not transferred to a woman's uterus—they are discarded or used in embryo-destructive research. This is not enhancement but negative eugenics.

Soon, however, we will be able to direct our DNA to make ourselves different. I say "different," because it is unclear to me that having keener than normal eye sight is necessarily a good to be desired. Likewise, I hardly think that being able to choose one's eye color is something worth the cost of genetic intervention. And, while I suppose that ten additional IQ points would be nice, I am quite certain that merely having them will not make people nicer. Finally, physical immortality, it seems to me, is something only some of the well-heeled would want.

The venues for the most rapid development of genetic enhancement will not (and are not) in the medical sector, but in the military and athletics. Competitive advantage means a great deal on both battlefields. For instance, articles in *Scientific American* (July 2004) and the *New York Times Magazine* (January 18, 2004), pointed out that athletes are already trying to access genetic intervention for enhancement purposes. More efficient killing machines (aka soldiers) and a speedier fast pitch seem to be "goods" for many people. But are they?

News junkies could not help but read about Marion Jones's tearful plea for forgiveness as she returned her Olympic medals because of her past steroid use. In response, Olympic javelin bronze-medalist Kate Schmidt maintained that athletes take enhancement drugs because of the expectation of fans and that doping is so pervasive it ought to be made acceptable. Olympic officials are loath to do so not only because most of the drugs have deleterious side-effects, including sudden death, but because doing so would fundamentally alter the nature of competitive sports. Even presumably safe enhancements would give unfair advantage.

Happily, and without nearly as much publicity, the U.S. Congress passed legislation at the end of last year banning "gene doping" in the United States. HR 6344 was signed into law on December 29, 2006, defining gene doping as, "the nontherapeutic use of cells, genes, genetic elements, or of the modulation of gene expression, having the capacity to enhance athletic performance."

"At its best, athletics celebrates remarkable human achievements that result from hard work, dedication, not from hypodermics and DNA labs," said Jaydee Hanson, director for Human Genetics Policy for the International Center for Technology Assessment. "This ban represents an important milestone for human dignity in the fight against a new eugenics that ultimately intends to engineer all human life."

Keeping amateur athletics amateur athletics is especially important with the 2008 Olympics in China just around the corner. The bill states that "The United States Anti-Doping Agency shall . . . ensure that athletes participating in amateur athletic activities recognized by the United States Olympic Committee are prevented from using performance-enhancing drugs or performance-enhancing genetic modifications accomplished through gene-doping . . . (and) permanently include 'gene doping' among any list of prohibited substances adopted by the Agency."

This is not only good news for amateur athletics, but good news for our humanity.

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