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 Faculty of Life Sciences

Ethical Reflection within the EADGENE Project

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Background

The objective of the work-package dealing with ethics in EADGENE has been to "guide the Network participants with regard to the ethical aspects/society perception of their work and to communicate and discuss implications"

During the past years, we have:

- identified ethical and societal issues (study + interviews),
- produced a set of research guidelines,
- worked out a strategy for dealing with ethical issues, and
- held four local ethical matrix workshops

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Agenda

During four work-shops,

- Roslin November 2007
- Liege December 2007
- Wageningen January 2008
- Paris February 2008

different groups of scientists within the EADGENE consortium have used the so-called Ethical Matrix as a tool for reflection on ethical issues in relation to their research.

The aim here will be

- to report the content of the ethical reflections through an attempt to reconstruct and systematize the structure of the arguments that have been put forward.
- to attempt to put the results in perspective by drawing out some their implications and the questions they raise for the handling of ethical concerns within the scientific community.

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The Ethical Matrix

The idea of the Ethical Matrix is, roughly, to ensure that, in an assessment of a technology or experiment, it is considered how all relevant parties, e.g.,

- producers,
- consumers,
- scientists,
- animals,
- the environment

are affected along the ethically important dimensions

- wellbeing,
- autonomy and
- justice

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Interest group	Respect for		
	WELLBEING	AUTONOMY	JUSTICE
PRODUCERS	Satisfactory income and working conditions	Managerial freedom	Fair trade rules
CONSUMERS	Food safety and quality of life	Choice	Affordability
TREATED ORGANISMS	Welfare	Behavioural freedom	Intrinsic value
BIOENVIRONMENT	Conservation	Maintenance of biodiversity	Sustainability

Generic ethical matrix. Source: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/bioethics/>

Interest group	Respect for		
	WELLBEING	AUTONOMY	JUSTICE
PRODUCERS/INDUSTRY			
CONSUMERS/CITIZENS			
SCIENTISTS			
ANIMALS IN RESEARCH			
PRODUCTION ANIMALS			
THE ENVIRONMENT			

Specific ethical matrix used in EADGENE workshops

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Cases

Each workshop used a local case to initiate the discussion:

- Treatment of calves for Mannheimia haemolytica
- Sample size in experiments on host response to PPRS (pigs)
- Breeding hens for higher robustness
- Eradicating scrapie in sheep

However, the discussions also comprised more general issues in animal disease genomics research

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Figure 1. Sample table of issues for EADGENE

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Issues of Major Importance – as Identified by Workshop Participants

Research should lead to substantial basic benefits

- Increased production efficiency
- Better food safety
- Indirectly: lower prices for consumers

The research animals suffer

- Can the suffering be avoided or reduced?
- Sample size?

Future production animals should benefit:

- better health, welfare

Scientists

- want their research to be valuable for society
- want to gain fundamental insight

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Second Thoughts: Complexities Identified

Uncertainty about benefits in the long term
 Does it really help or should the strategy be another?
 Is it really necessary?
 Animal production in the developed countries vs. needs of the poor

Does it have unintended consequences on environment, biodiversity etc.

Uncertainty about risks
 Information to consumers, society at large?
 Will freedom of choice be restricted?

Applied research is necessary for reasons of funding
 Restrictions on the right to publish (negative results)
 Patenting, ownership

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Local Variations?

The group of scientists within EADGENE appears to be very homogenous in their ethical approaches and attitudes with reservations if the sample is not representative

Perhaps some of the French-speaking have been CG1

- a little uneasy about expressing delicate points of ethics in English
- a little uneasy about the Anglo-Saxon tradition in bioethics

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End of Some Myths?

There is a very high awareness of ethical problems among the scientists within EADGENE

In particular:

- There is a clear perception that research animals (often) suffer
- There is a genuine concern about the research animals over and above just respecting the regulations
- There is a clear perception of uncertainties
- There is a clear perception of the larger context

Again, with reservations is the sample is not representative

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Conclusion Concerning the Future

There is a need to find time and space for ethical reflections within the institutions
 A little facilitating will be useful

Issues for further reflection:

There is uncertainty about the responsibilities of scientists

- Are scientists really responsible for the use of their results?
- It is difficult to live with the knowledge that results are 'misused' for other purposes than originally intended

How can scientists communicate about

- uncertainties
- their responsibility

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Next Steps

- On-line manual for ethical reflection in the EADGENE institutions
- Synthesis report of ethical and societal aspects
- Study of external stakeholders' perception
 - Workshop with external stakeholders

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