The World Health Organization recently defined priority actions that it would like to implement in the area of human genetics. At a meeting held on 20–21 July 2000 in Geneva, invited experts and WHO representatives met to discuss the role of the Organization in addressing ethical issues, legal and educational implications of new developments in research, and disparities for developing countries in access to the new technologies of human genetics.

The delegates acknowledged that many individuals, groups and nations have urgent concerns about the use and exploitation of genetic data and genome technology, but also noted concerns that non-genetic determinants of health should not be neglected in attempts to address these problems. WHO has produced several detailed guidelines outlining the ethical issues, but now wants to set priority targets for future work.

One area of particular importance is to ensure the availability of genomic and bioinformatics resources for all countries and, in particular, to provide a mechanism for involving developing countries in the decision-making processes. Abdallah Daar, Professor of Surgery at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman and a member of the Ethical, Legal and Social Implications Committee of the Human Genome Organization, commented: “There is a danger that the benefits of research in genetics will not be shared equitably and that inappropriate patenting may prove to be detrimental. WHO should participate in the international debate on the implications of patenting and biotechnology to ensure that the consequences for health in all countries are taken into account.” Indeed, WHO hopes to develop the capacity to offer a global response to the issues posed by the revolution in human genetics. Proposed projects include the formation of a genetic resource centre that will encourage collaboration between developing and industrialized countries. The centre would coordinate facilities and resources for research, education and the introduction of international standards in human genetics worldwide.

A meeting is planned with the Director-General of WHO in the near future to discuss how these plans may be implemented. ■

Barry Whyte, *Bulletin*