
Cancer Council, COSA applaud US Government recommendations on gene patent policy

Timely precedent as Senate prepares to report

US Government recommendations aimed at protecting the public from commercial exploitation of gene patents send a timely message to Australian policy makers, Cancer Council Australia and the Clinical Oncological Society of Australia (COSA) said today (19/2).

Cancer Council Australia CEO, Professor Ian Olver, and COSA President, Professor Bruce Mann, welcomed new recommendations from the US Secretary's Advisory Committee on Genetics, Health, and Society, which called for legal protection and policy reform to ensure gene patents do not restrict vital access to healthcare.

Professor Olver, a medical oncologist with a professional interest in genetic therapy, said developments in the US were timely, with Australia's Senate preparing to report after an exhaustive inquiry into gene patents in Australia.

"Nothing in Australian gene patent policy prevented the crisis that almost occurred in 2008, when a commercial entity threatened to enforce its patent monopoly by demanding public laboratories stop testing for breast and ovarian cancer risk," he said.

"The US secretary's committee, by calling for exemptions for tests and for use of genes for non-profit research, has since set an important precedent as Australia's Senate prepares to make recommendations about gene patent law here."

Professor Mann, a specialist breast surgeon who treats genetically at-risk patients, said the US recommendations were consistent with COSA and the Cancer Council's proposals to the Senate, such as establishing an advisory group for gene patents that included genetic clinicians.

"Gene patent policy needs formal clinical input, from professionals who understand the short and long-term scientific considerations in terms of patient care and future therapies," he said.

"Human genetic material is not an invention, but the discovery of something that exists in nature, and its use in research and diagnostic services should never be compromised by an outdated patent system."

US Government report is available at: http://oba.od.nih.gov/SACGHS/sacghs_home.html

Cancer Council position on gene patents:
www.cancer.org.au/Newsmedia/Issues_in_the_media/Gene_patents.htm

Cancer Council Australia/COSA submission to Senate inquiry:
www.cancer.org.au/policy/submissionstogovernment/GenePatentInquiry.htm

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