Waking Up From the Dream of Biotechnology

Hatchard Report

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Deep in a dream, our quiet consciousness suddenly realises that it is no longer a dream but has become a nightmare. The inner voice screams *'wake up'* which is the only way out.

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The dream of biotechnology is a new age of health, happiness and human achievement. James Watson, who discovered the double helix structure of DNA 70 years ago, was full of hope:

"We used to think that our fate was in our stars, but now we know that, in large measure, our fate is in our genes,… recombinant DNA is likely the safest revolutionary technology ever developed, and we should not postpone experiments with clear benefits for fear of hypothetical risks….I want to see cancer cured in my lifetime" Watson has enthused.

Watson is now in a nursing home aged 96 and cancer is not cured. In fact it has become rampant. Somewhere along the way, did the dream of biotechnology become a nightmare? If so, it is time to wake up.

How did we get here and what does the future hold?

If you ask Google what are the biotechnology success stories, it comes up with slim pickings. First up is a list of patented genetically engineered crops like cotton, soy and corn. These types are paired with proprietary pesticide products. A March 2023 report from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) says a consolidation trend within the agricultural seed industry began when the first genetically engineered traits were introduced to the market in the early 1990s. Since then, more than 200 US seed companies have been acquired or went out of business. The result is a concentration of market share among four seed companies. A June 2023 report by the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) found that when combined, AgReliant, Bayer, Corteva and Syngenta accounted for 83% of corn seed sales and 78% of soybean seed sales in the United States from 2018 to 2020. The trend is continuing, Bayer has just announced the consolidation of a further 10 regional seed brands in 2025.

This so-called success story of biotechnology is not about more nutritious strains, increased yields, etc., these largely remain the stuff of myth. It is about the profits of transnational corporations who control a concentration of intellectual property (IP) in the form of patented genetics and traits. This has left farmers trapped in an unsustainable cycle of heightened input costs and depressed commodity prices. This is not a route for New Zealand farming to travel. Much of the allure of New Zealand produce is our pristine shores and clean green image. The GE route leads to corporate slavery, trade barriers, public rejection and rock bottom prices.

Next up on Google is a list of biotech startups who promise a lot, but do they deliver? BiomassProtein is a Danish company who invented a process to turn grass into food. Like all such companies they have required massive investment and government funding but have yet to turn any profit or generate public interest. The biomass industry wouldn't be viable without renewable energy subsidies. In fact biomass projects are not generally sustainable environmentally or economically. Worldwide, governments have so far invested over $48 billion subsidising the biomass industry, much of it related to the dubious application of climate related tax credits.

As you go down any short list of biotech success stories, there is one feature that stands out above all else. The absolutely tremendous promise and *'promise'* is the operative word. For 70 years, since Watson and Crick's discovery, a lot of promises have been made and a lot of water has flowed under the bridge without actually generating any power. As we have reported on many occasions, you can make money in biotech by promising a lot, whether you deliver or not is largely immaterial. Along the way, government grants, speculative investment and intellectual property sales can make you into a multimillionaire without actually achieving, curing or selling anything. Third on Google's list is Fibrotech Therapeutics, an Australian company sold for $75 million in 2019 after *'promising'* phase 1 trials of a product to treat diabetic nephropathy. No further updates available.

So where does this all go to? There is only one answer to this question, and it is on everyone's lips—COVID-19. COVID-19 is THE great success story of biotechnology. Not only is it possible to create a totally new deadly disease but also share it through a crack in the lab door with the entire world's population. And it doesn't stop there, you can also create, sell and profit from a vaccine which doesn't work and actually harms a great many people. There is no liability whatsoever if you do so, even if you harm the economy. Learned papers have been written documenting the financial costs of the pandemic rated in hundreds of trillions of dollars and the human cost estimated to top 15-30 million excess deaths worldwide. If this hasn't dampened your enthusiasm for biotechnology probably nothing will.

It is into this last category that the New Zealand government falls. It has introduced the Gene Technology Bill which contains by far the most permissive legislation of any country in the world. At last New Zealand really is leading the world (perhaps in cupidity and stupidity). Its clauses contain all the pips and whistles most needed by transnational corporates—no criminal or civil liability for facilitators, no labelling of products, foods, and medicines required (the public won't even know), provision for government mandated approval (yes, it has that magic word 'mandate" which is music to the corporate ears), ability to fiddle to your heart's content with the DNA of animals, microbes plants, adults and children, no messy ethics, public watch dogs or testing requirements—simply apply to the one stop regulator for a rubber stamp.

What will happen to us?

A quick look across the ditch to Australia reveals they already have a Gene Technology Regulator. Dr Raj Bhula. He has announced that a period of 30 days of public submissions will be held starting in March before the probable approval of the release of genetically engineered mosquitoes in Queensland.

It doesn't stop there, the idea of experimenting on Australians is catching on fast. Incredibly, Bhula's office has just rated the following project at the Doherty Institute, University of Melbourne, as posing "*negligible to moderate risk to human health and safety*".

"The initial aim is to evaluate the safety and infectivity of recombinant seasonal human influenza viruses in healthy volunteers. These GM viruses will then be used to assess the effectiveness of therapeutic drugs or vaccine candidates to prevent and control influenza infection."

The lab is proposing to make gene altered versions of the flu and then test out various genetic drugs and/or vaccines on human volunteers over a five year period. Given the low risk rating by the regulator, the project, which creates new viruses, is likely to be a shoo-in for a rubber stamp. Does any of this sound at all familiar? It should.

Why is our government deregulating biotechnology at a time when the significant serious risks are becoming glaringly obvious even to children?

A little bird has told us the answer to this and it might be surprising—trade negotiations. The powers that be in the US have apparently decided to follow up on the massive profits that their pharmaceutical companies made during the pandemic by asking little New Zealand to deregulate biotechnology. I am not sure *'ask'* is the right word, but it is the polite term when it comes to trade diplomacy. In a rush of enthusiasm our Coalition government is eager to comply and damn the consequences. If we give in, we will be providing a helping hand to our *'friends'* in America who will then toddle off to Europe and ask them to follow suit. *"See, New Zealand did it, now it's your turn".* And if there are any projects that the American public, protected as they fortunately are by constitutional rights, believe to be a bridge too far, then New Zealand can step into the breach and pollute our hitherto pristine shores and clean green fields for them. There is a big pay day involved for someone, but not for the farmers or the honest Kiwi public.

There are a lot of reasons to reject the Gene Technology Bill. Find out more by viewing our YouTube video The Gene Technology Bill. What Kiwis Need To Know and then make a submission to the Health Select Committee by February 17th. We have published suggestions for a submission template.

Write to your MP. They need to be quizzed on this egregious Bill. They are trying to get this fast tracked during the holidays. We do not live in a country where people are willing to let others take away their food choices and increase exposure to serious long term environmental and health risks.

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