

# Study looks at impact of gene technologies

## Unique New Zealand response expected

By Tom McKinlay

New Zealand would come up with its own unique approach to managing the impact of the technologies flowing from the human genome project, visiting expert Prof Sheila McLean said yesterday.

Prof McLean is one of two international collaborators engaged on a University of Otago inter-disciplinary research project looking at the legal, ethical and policy implications of the human genome project.

The three-year, New Zealand Law Foundation-funded project is examining the likely impact of emerging human genetic technologies and how this country should respond.

Prof McLean is one of the United Kingdom's foremost authorities on medical law and ethics and has been closely involved in the debate there.

New Zealand's approach was already unique in that it was looking at how the human genome project would affect the entire community, she said yesterday in an interview.

"I happen to think that's something that would only happen in New Zealand, because it has a legal and social tradition of inclusiveness."

An example was the way in which the university's research project was including Maori perspectives.

"This is really quite unique because the indigenous population around the world tends to be ignored," Prof McLean said.

The university's project was initially looking at technologies that applied to pre-birth and the early stages of life, such as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, and aimed to have a first report on the subject by early next year.

It was an area that threw up significant issues, such as whether it was right to create children with a view to donating tissue or organs to a sibling.

For many people, reaction to those kinds of issues was quite intuitive, Prof McLean said.

Some believed that as long as the medical science was sound, the matter was settled, while others were opposed to any procedure that would result in choosing between embryos and destroying those not required.

"As you can see, there's actually a lot of big ethical issues just in that, that are bigger than the medical questions," she said.

Different countries had already

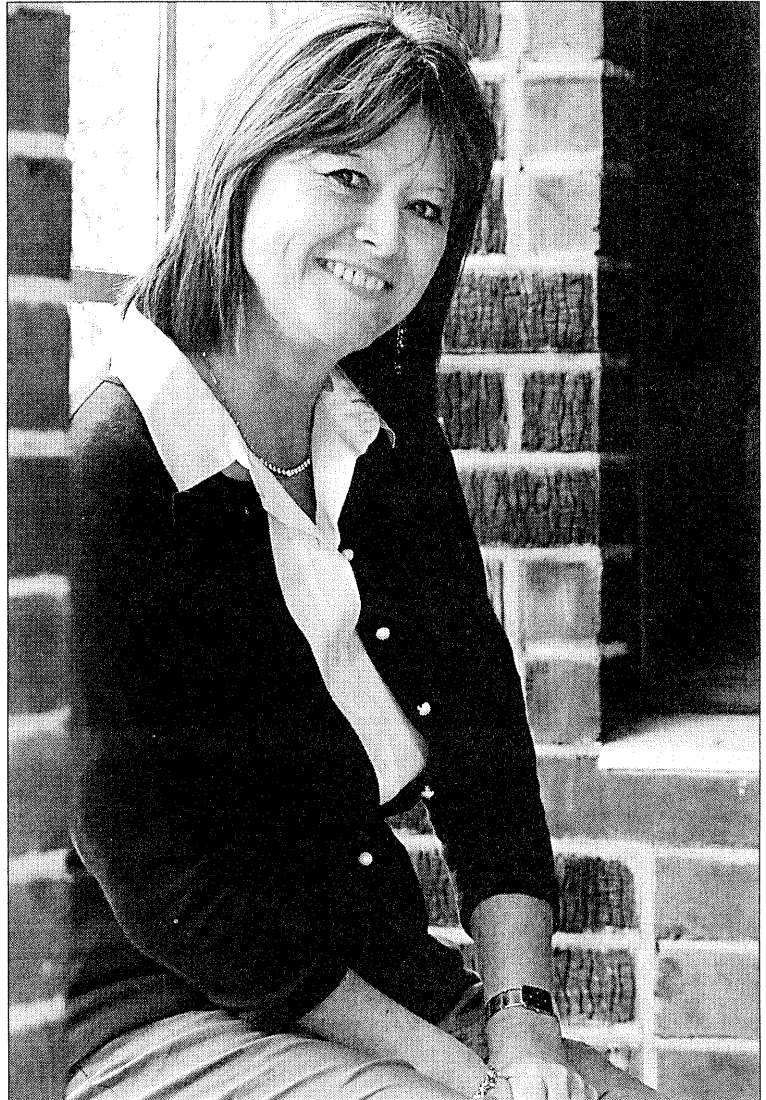


PHOTO: JANE DAWBER

**Outside view . . . Prof Sheila McLean is helping to shed some light on the debate around gene technologies.**

thrown up different responses to such questions.

In the case of pre-implantation sex selection, New Zealand law makers had imposed a ban, while the UK had decided in favour on the basis it would allow for balanced families.

In the west, there was little evidence parents were concerned about the sex of their child, so an argument that it would lead to a preponderance of boy or girl children did not stand up well.

"One thing this project aims to provide people with is information which is based on actual solid empirical work as well as looking

at the arguments in a reasoned way," Prof McLean said.

For example, the prospect of pre-implantation testing had led to suggestions it would usher in a race of tall, blond people with blue eyes, but there was little evidence that people's ambitions for their children were anything like as uniform.

There needed to be robust reasons for a society to decide it had reached a point beyond which it should not go.

Those involved in the project would not be pronouncing on the best way forward but did hope to clarify what the issues were.