

CRG HOLDS FORUMS ON RACE AND GENETICS

Culminating a year-long Ford Foundation-funded program, CRG held forums for advocates and academics in California and New York on issues raised by the intersection of genetics and race. The forums were based on the series of briefing papers CRG commissioned, featured in the current issue of CRG's magazine *GeneWatch* and accessible through this web site.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, Oakland was the site of the first forum, co-hosted with Generations Ahead, a local non-profit organization that brings diverse communities together to expand the public debate and promote policies on genetic technologies that protect human rights and affirm our shared humanity. A large, extremely diverse gathering of social & racial justice activists, civil liberties and privacy advocates met at the California Endowment's Conference Center to hear presentations and discuss the issues. A prominent panel of experts including Professor Troy Duster of UC, Berkeley and NYU, Michael Risher, Staff Attorney of the ACLU of Northern California, and Associate Professor Osagie Obasogie of UC, Hastings, provided presentations on ancestry testing and race, racial disparities in California's forensic DNA databases, and scientific research conducted on prison populations.

The following week, the venerable American Museum of Natural History in New York City hosted a CRG forum featuring Professor Robert Pollack, Director of Columbia University's Center for the Study of Science and Religion, Professor Michael Yudell of Drexel University's School of Public Health, CRG Board Chair and Tufts University Professor Sheldon Krimsky, Professor Patricia Williams of Columbia Law School, and Robert Perry, Legislative Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU). The forum's topics ranged from natural selection, the human genome and the idea of race to the history of science's treatment of race, racial disparities in DNA databanks, a sociological perspective on biology, race and culture, and the growth of government DNA databases in New York State. Robert Perry explained how mission creep has characterized the growth of DNA databases at all levels of government in every state. The first databases consisted only of those convicted of crimes of violence and sexual assault and then progressed to all felons and finally to those simply arrested for both felonies and misdemeanors. A thoughtful discussion with the audience followed, centering on ways in which science has contributed to the (mis)perception of biological differences as racially based and how technology has far outpaced society's ability to assess its effects on civil liberties and privacy as well as how it is being used to reinforce patterns of institutional racism.

Discussion at both forums focused on the growing realization that government and the culture as a whole have been unable to properly evaluate the ramifications of developments in biotechnology on quality of life issues and principles of equal protection in a democratic country. The benefits of these technologies have received far more attention than their harmful impacts, particularly as they relate to the justice system, the rights of the citizen in a complex, diverse society, and reinforcement of the concept of race through the creation of racialized medical practice.

The hunger for information on this critical subject matter has produced calls from around the country to CRG, requesting similar forums to raise public awareness and engage communities in a discussion of the issues. As CRG has expanded its programming on genetics and race and the process of public education has developed, a consensus has been growing that the benefits of biotechnology should be harnessed for the common good, while simultaneously regulating and managing it to protect the public from unintended harmful consequences. CRG will continue to be a leading force in dissemination of information related to these issues, both nationally and internationally. Encapsulating the essence of the forums, Professor Pollack stated: “Ideas are learned or imagined, they cannot be genetic.”

For more information about the forums, contact Kathy Sloan at ksloan@gene-watch.org