

9 May 2005

The Council for Science and Technology is seeking views on whether there is a useful role for a universal ethical code for scientists in your institution(s). We would welcome a response before 1 November 2005.

Background

Following on from conversations at a Carnegie meeting (a regular informal meeting of science ministers and advisers from G8 countries) last year, Sir David King, the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, convened a small working group¹ to help him to consider the issues around developing a universal ethical code of conduct for scientists. The group agreed that it would be most useful to develop a code that would:

- have an educational role, raising awareness among scientists and the public of the ethical and professional responsibilities of scientists;
- capture a small number of broad principles that are shared across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, so that it would be relevant to anyone whose work uses scientific methods including social, natural, medical and veterinary science, engineering and mathematics;
- be adopted voluntarily by individual scientists and scientific institutions. Many scientific institutions already have codes of conduct and ethical frameworks in place, generally specific to the interests and needs of that institution. A universal code of conduct would not seek to replace institutions' own frameworks. Rather, it would describe principles common to the practice of all good science that institutions would be encouraged to adopt and integrate into their own structures, thus supporting and encouraging individual scientists to reflect on the code as part of their normal work.

Rigour, respect and responsibility: a universal ethical code for scientists (enclosed) is the product of the group's work. It aims to 'foster ethical research, to encourage active reflection among scientists on the wider implications and impacts of their work, and to support constructive communication between scientists and the public on complex and challenging issues'.

¹ The members of the group were: Sir David King (Chair), Dr David Coles, Dr David Fisk, Baroness Onora O'Neill, Professor Michael Reiss, Professor John Uff QC; and Council for Science and Technology (CST) members: Professor Geoffrey Boulton, Professor Janet Finch, Professor Kathy Sykes, Sir Paul Nurse, Dr Mark Walport.

Sir David King has circulated the code to his G8 and EU colleagues, and will be trialling it with government scientists as part of his role as the Head of Profession. He has asked the Council for Science and Technology (CST), the government's top-level advisory body on strategic science and technology policy issues, to look at how the code could be disseminated more widely and how, in practice, it could have a useful role.

This letter

We are writing with a dual purpose:

- to encourage you to explore how you could make use of the document *Rigour, respect and responsibility: a universal ethical code for scientists* within your own institution(s);
- to ask you to share your views and experiences with CST so that we are able to advise Sir David King on whether and how this code should be promoted more widely.

The *universal ethical code for scientists* presented here is intended to be a stimulus for reflection and discussion on the ethical and professional responsibilities of scientists. We have suggested a number of places that the code could be used to achieve this aim below, and there will be many alternatives:

- As part of science, citizenship and general studies lessons in schools and colleges.
- Within under- and post-graduate teaching and seminar programmes.
- As part of the graduation ceremony for under- and/or post-graduate students.
- As part of staff guidance or employment contracts.
- Linked to the award of research funding.
- As an overarching link between more specific ethical and professional codes

We have allowed six months for responses to this letter. We hope that institutions will use this time to consider seriously whether they would want to adopt or use the *universal ethical code for scientists* and how they could put this in to practice.

We would be interested to know:

1. Do you think that the *universal ethical code for scientists* has the potential to fulfil the aims of: fostering ethical research; encouraging active reflection; and supporting constructive communication? Please explain briefly.
2. Would your institution(s) consider adopting or using the *universal ethical code for scientists*?
 - If yes, what could this mean in practice? Which of the options that you have identified would seem most feasible and most worthwhile?
 - If no, why not? Is your reasoning of specific relevance to your institution or one of more general principle?
3. Have you, or do you plan to, take the opportunity to put the *universal ethical code for scientists* into use? If yes, could you describe briefly: how it was or will be used; and what impact it had or you hope it will have. How do you think others could be persuaded to take similar steps?

Contact

If you have any questions at all about this letter, or would like to discuss any issues around the *universal ethical code for scientists*, please do not hesitate to contact Jacqui Russell at the CST secretariat in the first instance.

Jacqui Russell, CST secretariat, Bay 307, 1 Victoria Street, London, SW1P 0ET.
Tel: 020 7215 3973 Fax: 020 7215 0313 email: jacqui.russell@dti.gsi.gov.uk

Copies of this letter, and the *universal ethical code for scientists*, are available from www.cst.gov.uk/cst/business. Please do pass this letter on to others who you think may be interested.

Responses

Please send any response to this letter by 1 November 2005 to:

Council for Science and Technology
Bay 307
1 Victoria Street
London
SW1P 0ET

Or by email to: cstinfo@dti.gsi.gov.uk

Conclusion

This issue of whether there is a role for an overarching *universal ethical code for scientists* is an important one that deserves serious consideration. We very much look forward to receiving your thoughts.

Yours sincerely



Sir Keith Peters
Co-chair, Council for Science and Technology

Rigour, respect and responsibility: a universal ethical code for scientists

This is a public statement of the values and responsibilities of scientists.¹ It aims to foster ethical research, to encourage active reflection among scientists on the wider implications and impacts of their work, and to support constructive communication between scientists and the public on complex and challenging issues.

Individuals and institutions are encouraged to adopt and promote this code. It is meant to capture a small number of broad principles that are shared across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. It is not intended to replace codes of conduct or ethics relating to specific professions or areas of research.

Rigour, respect and responsibility: a universal ethical code for scientists

Rigour, honesty and integrity

- Act with skill and care in all scientific work. Maintain up to date skills and assist their development in others.
- Take steps to prevent corrupt practices and professional misconduct. Declare conflicts of interest.
- Be alert to the ways in which research derives from and affects the work of other people, and respect the rights and reputations of others.

Respect for life, the law and the public good

- Ensure that your work is lawful and justified.
- Minimise and justify any adverse effect your work may have on people, animals and the natural environment.

Responsible communication: listening and informing

- Seek to discuss the issues that science raises for society. Listen to the aspirations and concerns of others.
- Do not knowingly mislead, or allow others to be misled, about scientific matters. Present and review scientific evidence, theory or interpretation honestly and accurately.

Commentary

There are already powerful incentives for individuals and for institutions to adhere to the principles set out in this code. These include: the high professional and ethical standards upheld by the scientific community; structures put in place by employers, professional bodies and funders to enforce these standards; and national and international conventions, treaties and laws.

Scientists and institutions are encouraged to reflect on and debate how this code may relate to their own work. For example, acting with rigour, honesty and integrity may include: not committing plagiarism or condoning acts of plagiarism by others; ensuring that work is peer reviewed before it is disseminated; reviewing the work of others fairly; ensuring that primary data that may be needed to allow others to audit, repeat or build on work, are secured and stored. Similarly, in communicating responsibly, scientists need to make clear the assumptions, qualifications or caveats underpinning their arguments.

¹ In this context, the code is intended to include anyone whose work uses scientific methods, including social, natural, medical and veterinary sciences, engineering and mathematics.