

VCU survey: US public supports genetic research, testing and government spending on research

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The 2008 Virginia Commonwealth University Life Sciences survey shows that eight in 10 adults nationwide favor making genetic testing easily available to all who want it, and 54 percent say that the benefits of conducting genetic research outweigh the risks.

Public concerns about genetic research are varied with a plurality of 38 percent saying their main concern is that too little is known about how to conduct such research safely. About three in 10, or 28 percent, say their main concern is that genetic research will be used in ways that violate moral principles, while 21 percent are most concerned about discrimination. A majority of the U.S. public is skeptical that government regulation will protect the public from any risks associated with genetic science.

The VCU Life Sciences Survey, in its eighth year, was conducted by telephone with 1,005 adults nationwide, from Nov. 24 to Dec. 7, 2008. The margin of error for the poll is plus or minus 3.8 percentage points. This is the eighth annual VCU Life Sciences Survey, conducted for VCU Life Sciences and the VCU College of Humanities and Sciences by the VCU Center for Public Policy.

Other survey findings:

Support for government spending on scientific research, especially when

it promises immediate benefits. Despite the economic downturn, there is considerable public support for spending on scientific research. Nearly a quarter of respondents, 23 percent, say that government spending on scientific research should be a top priority. Fifty-nine percent say it should be important, but not a top priority. Only 15 percent of adults say that government spending on scientific research is not too or not at all important. Support for spending on research with immediate benefits is stronger than for basic science research. Fifty-four percent of adults say that spending on research with immediate benefits is important, while 38 percent say that spending on research that advances knowledge even if there are no immediate benefits is important.

Which is more important: nature or nurture? When asked the more important influence on behavior -- the environment or genes -- a majority of respondents, 57 percent, said the environment. Similarly, most take the position that environmental factors and living practices can alter a person's likelihood for disease. Two-thirds of Americans disagree that "a person's likelihood for disease is pretty much set from birth and cannot be greatly increased or decreased by their environment and living practices."

Science and society. Fully 83 percent of Americans say that new developments in science have helped make society better. Forty-six percent say science has helped make society a lot better, while 36 percent say it has helped make society somewhat better. More than six in 10, or 61 percent, agree that scientific research is essential for improving the quality of human lives. Some ambivalence in public sentiment continues to surface when it comes to how science matches up with moral principles. A majority of the public, 53 percent, says that scientific decisions should be based primarily on an analysis of the risks and benefits involved rather than the moral and ethical issues involved, cited by 32 percent. At the same time, a majority, 56 percent, agrees that scientific research doesn't pay enough attention to the moral values of

society.

Embryonic and non-embryonic stem cell research. New scientific developments have changed the landscape of stem cell research. Seven-in-10 adults favor stem cell research when it does not involve human embryos, down slightly from 75 percent just after the November 2007 announcement that human skin cells can be used to create stem cells or their near equivalents. Support for embryonic stem cell research is similar to past years: 57 percent of adults favor embryonic stem cell research, while 36 percent oppose.

Cloning and therapeutic cloning. Opinion about therapeutic cloning is more divided. Fifty-two percent of adults favor and 45 percent oppose using cloning technology for the development of new medical treatments. When cloning is not restricted to therapeutic purposes, about eight in 10, 78 percent, oppose the use of cloning technology in humans. Opinion on both issues has been fairly stable since the first VCU Life Sciences Survey on public opinion about science and biotechnology was conducted in 2001.

Current and past survey reports are available at www.vcu.edu/lifesci/centers/cen_lse_surveys.html.

Source: Virginia Commonwealth University

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