

## FORUM

### GENETICS AND THE LAW<sup>#</sup>

#### FOREWORD

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The rapid advances in the genomic sciences have attracted strong public interest. This is evidenced by the immediate and widespread news coverage that an exciting new genetic development or controversy generates. Science fiction scenarios help to support the mystique surrounding the human genome. (If you think it may be possible to clone a genetically identical descendant, see Skene, page 804. For a failed attempt to detect a genetic predisposition in railway employees, see Trent, page 809.) Yet science fiction aside, for many people genetic information has a special significance. Genetic technology's importance, in part, rests with the expectation that new therapies will be developed as our understanding of the genetic contribution to disease continues to expand – genetic technology is expected to reshape clinical practice and give us the ability to manage and control our genetic constraints.

It is against this backdrop that the question arises: how are the social, economic, ethical and legal issues arising from the developments in genomic science best dealt with? The responses considered in this collection of articles show that such questioning inevitably leads to further, more specific issues: Does an individual have a right to know about his or her genetic status? Does a doctor have a duty to warn the family members of a patient with a genetic predisposition? On what does public trust in biotechnological research depend? Is the desire to prohibit a single act such as human cloning enough to warrant the creation of an enforcement regime?

The purpose of the 'Genetics and the Law' *Forum* is to encourage thoughtful and considered debate on what is a very important and current issue. This *Forum*

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is published 50 years after James Watson and Francis Crick first reported the double helix structure of DNA, and falls between the Australian Law Reform Commission ('ALRC') and Australia Health Ethics Committee's final report, *Essentially Yours: The Protection of Human Genetic Information in Australia*, and the ALRC's inquiry into Gene Patenting and Human Health.

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