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Nanotechnology: balancing benefits and risks to public health and the environment

Reply to Recommendation¹: Recommendation 2017 (2013)
Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has examined with interest Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2017 (2013) on “Nanotechnology: balancing benefits and risks to public health and the environment”, which was referred to a number of intergovernmental committees for comments.² It agrees that, as with most emerging technologies, nanotechnology has potential benefits, in particular for the development of “Nanomedicine”, but it also carries risks of serious harm, both to human health and to eco-systems and the environment.
2. The Committee of Ministers has noted with interest the Assembly’s proposal that the Committee on Bioethics (DH-BIO) prepare a feasibility study with a view to “the elaboration of possible standards in this area”. It would signal, however, that the proposals of the Parliamentary Assembly cover fields such as the environment, going beyond the DH-BIO’s field of competence.
3. The Committee of Ministers recalls that the role of progress in sciences and technologies in the biological and medical field in the improvement of human health and quality of life is widely acknowledged in the work of the Council of Europe. However, the implications for human beings of a misuse of such knowledge and technologies are also stressed and, as stated in the preamble of the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, the need to use this progress for the benefit of present and future generations.
4. The Committee of Ministers recalls that the objective of the work carried out by the DH-BIO is to protect human dignity and individual rights in the field of biomedicine, in particular with respect to new scientific and technological advances. To that end, it follows developments in the biomedical field to assess the ethical challenges.
5. Against this background, the Committee of Ministers would inform the Assembly that, in the Programme of Activities for the biennium 2014-2015, it is proposed to examine the scientific and ethical challenges raised by emerging technologies, including nanotechnology. This would encompass the preparation of studies to analyse the implications for human rights of these technologies and their applications in the biomedical field with a view to drafting a possible white paper.
6. Furthermore, the applications of nanotechnology outside the field of biomedicine may have indirect effects on human health. Their bioethical implications could be identified in the studies considered.
7. The Committee of Ministers considers that this work brings a first response to the issues raised by the Assembly.

1. Adopted at the 1187th meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies (11 December 2013).

2. European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS), the Committee on Bioethics (DH-BIO) and the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH).

