

EPTA Conference, Bern, 2003-10-23

Welcome Address

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Mr. Chairmen

Ladies and Gentlemen

The Presidency of the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment is rotating with a new chair every year. It is a particular privilege for Switzerland to host this year's conference today and tomorrow here in Berne. Having ratified the bilateral agreements two years ago, Switzerland's path towards Europe is still lined with many hurdles. As a member of the Swiss Parliament I am therefore very pleased and would like to thank you for choosing Switzerland for the presidency of this years meeting. It offers a unique opportunity for mutual exchanges on experiences of different concepts, methodology and results in the area of Technology Assessment.

The fact that Switzerland has been accepted as a full member of the EFTA-Network demonstrates the openness of this European organization for integrating a broad spectrum of different views and approaches. It is obvious that Switzerland is not only welcome but is also challenged to share its specific national experience with the other member countries as a nation with a direct democratic system, where the people - due to the referendum - and not the parliament have the last word about new legislation.

The rapid progress of novel technologies particularly in the field of life sciences is a continuous challenge for timely legislation and regulation. In this context the most recent development of research activities with embryos and embryonic stem cells might serve as an exemplary case. The significance of stem cells was hardly known to the Swiss legislators when our parliament was debating our new law on human reproduction and in vitro fertilization only five years ago.

As legislators we have an increasing need for a solid and farsighted scientific analysis and evaluation of such novel technologies as research on embryos and genomics like DNA-diagnostics. These legislation activities should be accompanied in parallel by professional analysis and evaluation of the social implications. Public perception of a new technology is in our country a key factor in the decision making process for the outcome of federal legislation.

Conclusions and an easy understandable communication to the legislator and to all other interested parties by TA – Swiss were very useful for a number of recent parliamentary decisions. Innovative participative procedures managed by TA Swiss Organization have also most successfully contributed to public opinion building, which is – as just mentioned - a crucial element in our direct democracy. It takes only 50 000 signatures in order to initiate a public referendum for new legislation which has successfully passed parliament.

As an example I should like to outline our most recent regulatory approach to embryo- and stem cell research. We started from a rather restrictive constitutional basis with respect to research on humans embryos. Within a period of only two years our parliament developed a well-accepted special federal law for stem cell research including the hotly debated use of supernumerary embryos derived from in vitro fertilizations.

In a further step we are now heading for a comprehensive law regulating research on humans in general. This federal law will cover remaining regulatory gaps, like fetal research, cell transplantation to name a few. Special existing laws on human reproduction, transplantation, embryo research, genomics and clinical research will be revised according to the needs resulting from the rapid progress of the biomedical sciences.

Swiss TA will therefore be asked to continue to provide scientific facts and to accompany the legislation process with participatory events. For these activities the incorporation of TA Swiss into the EPTA-Network is and will be essential for a timely updating of our scientific database. The value assessments in society, which strongly depends on national and regional cultures will -for good reasons-, remain rather the domain of national TA Organizations.

With this outlook, I wish you all a successful meeting with challenging discussions and I hope that the conference will enhance existing collaborations and create new ties within the EPTA network, to the benefit of highly innovative and highly competitive Europe.