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## **NEWS**

### **MEDIA BACKGROUNDER**

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### **Civil liberties challenges presented by human genetics research**

Genetic predisposition to disease is being used to deny insurance coverage and employment. Members of the U.S. armed services are required to give tissue samples for a massive government DNA database. Also, public policies are being formed based on widespread claims that genes "cause" a host of physical and behavioral conditions.

Genetic research is leading to invasions of privacy, genetic discrimination and other erosions of civil liberties, according to Philip Bereano, professor of technical communication at the University of Washington and a national expert on the role of science and technology in society. At the American Association for the Advancement of Science's 1997 annual meeting, Bereano is coordinating a session titled "The Challenges to Civil Liberties Presented by Human Genetics Research," 8:30-11:30 a.m. on Tuesday (Feb. 18).

"Many decision-makers in government and social institutions treat genetic information as deterministic rather than, as is the case in most situations, conditional and probabilistic," said Bereano, who sits on the boards of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Council for Responsible Genetics and the Biotechnology Working Group. He also is an elected fellow of the AAAS. "Civil liberties are imperiled by massive data-collection programs, data-bank storage and maintenance practices and policies governing who should have access to such information."

Other participants in the Challenges to Civil Liberties session are: Dr. Paul Billings, clinical associate professor of internal medicine at Stanford University and deputy chief of staff at the Palo Alto Veterans Affairs Medical Center; David J. Christianson, vice president of the American Academy of Actuaries; Donald Power, a U.S. Navy machinist mate second class who is challenging the Department of Defense DNA testing policy; Deborah Senn, Washington State Insurance Commissioner; and Nadine Strossen, president of the ACLU.

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