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Antiterror ethics code urged

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Anna Fazackerley

Email: afazackerley@yahoo.co.uk

British members of parliament (MPs) today called for the introduction of an ethical code of conduct for scientists, to heighten awareness of the potential misuse of their research by terrorists. They also attacked the government for failing to respond to inject cash into counterterrorist research.

The final [report](#) of the House of Commons [Science And Technology Committee's](#) inquiry into the scientific response to terrorism, published this morning (November 6), warned that if the scientific community did not take stronger action to regulate itself, it risked having "ill-judged restrictions" placed upon it by politicians, due to mounting concern within the UK government. But the code of conduct has received a lukewarm reaction from the UK research community, at a time when leading American scientists are [protesting](#) about "punitive" [federal treatment of bioterrorist researchers](#).

The committee expressed alarm that there had been very little new investment in research into countermeasures to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear attacks. It called for the establishment of a center of home defense to develop technologies for civilian use.

The chair of the committee, Ian Gibson, told us: "We need to follow the US example and put a lot of money into encouraging research right across the board to handle the potential terrorist threat."

The report urged learned societies and the research councils to take the lead in setting up the new ethical code of conduct. It suggested researchers who failed to comply with it should be refused grants from the councils and memberships to the societies. The MPs said such a measure would need to be backed up by programs informing researchers of what the main issues were.

The [Wellcome Trust](#), one of the world's leading biomedical research charities, has supported idea of self-regulation for scientists working with dangerous pathogens and toxins and has suggested that the code should work on an international as well as national level.

But the Wellcome Trust stressed that the open publication of research was vital, even in sensitive areas, and warned that "overzealous" government intervention would be highly damaging.

Mark Walport, the trust's new director, said, "The benefits resulting from such responsibly conducted work far outweigh the possibility of terrorists hijacking this information and using it for nefarious purposes."

Alan Malcolm, the chief executive of the [Institute of Biology](#), told us that researchers were already behaving ethically and would not need any radical changes in their behavior. He added, "In principle, it is comparatively easy to see the way ahead, but the devil will be in the detail of how you phrase this code and how you enforce it."

In its evidence to the parliamentary inquiry, [Research Councils UK](#) (RCUK) said it would need to be persuaded that an ethical code for scientists would achieve anything useful. A spokesperson for RCUK told us that the councils still had reservations and that they would be meeting to discuss the issues in the near future.

The committee's report also called for the existing Foreign and Commonwealth Office scheme for vetting foreign students to be replaced.

In theory, all postgraduate research applications from students in one of the 11 named "countries of concern" wanting to work in a high-risk area should be referred to the government for approval. But in practice, adherence to the scheme is extremely patchy, with some universities ignoring it completely. In one evidence session, the committee heard that over a period of 6 months, four universities had referred over 500 applications from foreign researchers, while other similar institutions had referred none.

David Allen, the chair of the [Association of Heads of University Administration](http://www.ahua.ac.uk), who gave evidence to the committee about the poor take-up, told us: "We welcome the replacement of the current scheme, which is not fit for purpose." But he expressed relief that the committee had not backed calls for compulsory vetting.

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