



MEDIA RELEASE

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Government urged to prevent risk of new pandemic

A five year ban on precarious research is likely to be lifted in December 2009, resulting in the risk of a new disease being unleashed on society.

Background: In December 2004, the National Health & Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommended that animal to human transplants not be undertaken in Australia for a period of five years.

The procedures, known as xenotransplantation, involve the transplantation of cells, tissue or organs from one species to another and carry the risk of viruses jumping across the species barrier resulting in a 'xeno-zoonotic' disease.

AAHR has been advised by experts that the concerns, which resulted in the 2004 moratorium being announced, remain unchanged. The five year ban is due to expire in December 2009.

AAHR Chief Executive Officer, Helen Marston, said today: *"The recent global panic over Swine flu could perhaps serve as a (very modest) precursor of how the world might react should a new zoonotic disease emerge from xenotransplantation. While the outbreak of the H1N1 virus was declared by the World Health Organisation to be a "public health emergency of international concern", a more virulent strain might easily have a much higher level of transmissibility and more serious health consequences."*

"An individual has the right to expose themselves to any risks involved in scientific research but to further expose that risk to the wider community, who have NOT given consent, is highly unethical."

"The number of individuals that could suffer and die from a new epidemic could greatly exceed those potential lives which xenotransplantation was supposed to have saved in the first place" concluded Ms Marston.

AAHR is calling for:

- Full public debate, making it a community decision rather than leaving it to the research community as it will be the general public that will pay the ultimate penalty of any fallout;
- Productivity Commission to report on the full economic impact of xenotransplantation should it be allowed to proceed – including the possibility of an epidemic and emergency response plans in such an event ;

- A moratorium on all current pre-clinical xenotransplantation studies.

AAHR urges the government to ensure that the current moratorium remains in place until such time as these critical measures have been actioned.

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