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Judges urged to consider criminal genes

 **Full Coverage**

By Michael Holden



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LONDON (Reuters) - Judges of the future should be able to consider offenders' genetic make-up before sentencing them, a leading think-tank says.

A criminal's genetic disposition towards anti-social behaviour, such as violence or aggression, should be as valid a factor for judges as psychiatric reports or personality disorders, the Nuffield

Council on Bioethics said on Wednesday.

"If you found that someone had a genetic make-up of this kind together with certain environmental factors, you might find probation plus anger treatment or therapy more appropriate than sending them to prison," Professor Bob Hepple, chairman of the council's working party, told Reuters.

"If people are found guilty of criminal behaviour it shouldn't be an excuse but it may be relevant to the way in which they are treated."

The council, a body formed to identify and report on ethical questions raised by advances in research, made its recommendation in a report entitled "Genetics and Human Behaviour: the Ethical Context".

An international team of researchers said in August they had identified a single gene which might explain why some boys abused in childhood – but not all – grew up to be violent or aggressive.

They found 85 percent of young boys who had a weakened version of the gene and had been abused turned to criminal or anti-social behaviour.

Hepple said it showed the importance of both nature and nurture in an individual's development.

"If you are aggressive you can go and have anger management courses. You can restrain your genetic predisposition or channel it in certain ways," he said.

He also dismissed the notion that genetic information alone could be used to predict anti-social behaviour.

"We don't think the case is made out yet for preventive detention or anything of that kind. That would be horrifying science fiction stuff," he said.

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NO "DESIGNER BABIES"

The report also came out against the idea of "designer babies."

In February, the fertility watchdog allowed a couple to select an embryo to have the same genetic match as their terminally-ill three-year-old son who needed a bone marrow transplant.

But Hepple strongly rejected the idea of designer babies where parents could use genetics to play a role in their baby's intelligence, sexual orientation or personality.

Although as yet there is no scientific evidence to link certain genes to particular behavioural traits, he said it would arise, creating "really serious moral issues".

"We shouldn't be trying in any way to impose a more intelligent child or a child with a particular type of personality," he said.

"If you allow it for abnormal conditions such as chronic diseases, it doesn't follow that you have to allow it for what we regard as the normal make-up of mankind."

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