

Time for ELSI to Take its Proper Place from Lab to Market

Ilise L Feitshans*

The Work Health and Survival Project, Haddonfield, New Jersey, USA

***Corresponding author:** Ilise L Feitshans, Executive Director, The Work Health and Survival Project, 21 walnut street, Haddonfield, New Jersey, USA. Tel: +19172399960; +41798363965; Email: forecastingnanolaw@gmail.com

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Commentary

Despite its cross cutting importance for the funding, permissions for development of materials and licensing products and ultimate control of protection for end-users, there has been little or no recognition of existing nanotechnology research addressing ELSI, the ethical legal social and policy implications of nanotechnology in commerce, to date. Additionally, the social impact of nanotechnology's revolution means that technology will bring social change in many areas of daily life. For this reason, some research scientists have called for Responsible Development of Nanotechnology, but without stating the legal ethical and social parameters. It is difficult to imagine how responsible development of nanotechnology can proceed without adequate attention to these parameters, and there is reason to believe that ELSI matters in actual corporate practice despite the dearth of literature regarding these subjects. Beyond the issues of funding that so often have a small percentage set aside for ethical.

Legal and societal issues as an add-on, the toughest policy questions to grapple with are the problematic but incredibly vital body of juridical nanotechnology research and its link to the broader issues of research priorities and risk assessment in the greater nanoscience community and then to the rest of the world. ELSI programming is relatively new for the sciences, because it is an add-on to the culture of governmental science funding that started in the late 20th century. In the 1990s, a concerted stakeholder effort to demand transparency and accountability in purpose and effect of government-based Human Genome Initiative (HGI) funding resulted in a small but potent series of grants to study these topics, which had previously been considered a target at best, or ignored, by major scientific projects for centuries before. A heritage that has emerged from the human genome project of funded projects

about Ethical, Legal and Social Impact (ELSI) research has important implications for nanotechnology. Questions about eugenics, autonomy, social justice, access to data and subsequent treatments or cures, the right to refuse such treatments, and the choices that are available to patients and their loved ones began two decades ago, but have yet to be resolved from a policy standpoint or in daily medical practice. So too, a series of questions about the life cycle of new consumer products and their impact upon health and the traditional divisions among populations in society must be considered in the field of nanotechnology, drawing in part upon the Human Genome Initiative ELSI projects.

Legislative drafting for genetic privacy and to prevent discrimination based on HIV AIDS is therefore also the blueprint for examining nano-enabled products as a vehicle for positive social change in the context of a skill set for translating science into policy. By translating complex concepts across disciplines, to break through the "silo" mentality among leading researchers and high level policymakers in order to craft sensible rules that reflect the transdisciplinary nature of nanotechnology developments and its ubiquitous character in daily life throughout the world. Lab to market efforts for SafeNano Design and innovative approaches for positive incentives for compliance with precautionary principle embodied in regulations that promote Nanosafety are just the first step towards progress in achieving well reasoned global health and commercial policies. To do so requires that ELSI programs bring these experts together. This approach is essential not only because of the great cost savings to be realized by giving extra exposure to projects that enjoy public funding, but because the convergence of these technologies within an ethical and legal framework is crucial to the work, health and survival of people and ecosystems around the world.