Europe tackles ethics of biobanks

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A technician conducts medical research in March 2012. Collections of human biological samples used in medical research should be governed by clear rules that safeguard ethics while advancing knowledge, scientists said Wednesday at a Council of Europe symposium.

Collections of human biological samples used in medical research should be governed by clear rules that safeguard ethics while advancing knowledge, scientists said Wednesday at a Council of Europe symposium.

The council, a 47-country organisation founded to promote democracy and human rights in Europe, plans to release new recommendations on such collections, known as biobanks, after this week's meeting of experts at its headquarters in Strasbourg, France.

The text will replace a set of recommendations adopted in 2006.

Biobanks "are now recognised as very important to advance research," said Laurence Lwoff, secretary of the council's bioethics committee.

"A consensus is emerging on the need for a coherent framework on biobanks, between restrictive legal measures on fundamental principles and less strict codes of conduct to allow them to develop," she added.

Key questions include protecting donors' personal data and addressing what samples can be used for.

At the moment, not all the council's member states follow the same rules on getting donors' consent or informing them what becomes of their samples.

"We need to establish confidence with the donors, and convince them that biobanks are a research tool," said Christian Chabanon, head of the Paoli-Calmettes Institute's cancer biobank in the French city of Marseille, home to almost 250,000 specimens.

Chabanon said months or years can pass before a sample is used, so initial consent given by donors should specify if the samples would be used only for a specific type of research or for all kinds of research.