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Saturday, February 14, 2009

Benefits of synthetic biology discussed

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DICK AHLSTROM

BIOTECHNOLOGY: THE TIME is coming when if a new drug, cheap fuels or novel materials are needed, synthetic biology will deliver them. However, with the possibility of building “artificial” organisms comes the risk of unintentional harm should they escape.

A session entitled Synthetic Life: One Biobrick at a Time yesterday discussed the great potential of synthetic biology. The field was advancing so quickly that it was difficult to predict where we would be in just a few years, stated Prof Drew Endy of Stanford University.

“We are now directly manipulating DNA and know a great deal about the structure of organisms but we remain at the very early stages of this technology,” he said.

“The technology is surprisingly immature. When you look at all the things we could do, we are hardly scratching the surface.”

Waiting for the necessary technology is slowing progress, for example cheap systems that can quickly string together DNA sequences, yet there are no ends to the potential applications.

Building synthetic components based on designs in nature could be used in energy production, food and drug development, medicine, materials fabrication and dozens of other areas, he said. “Biology is a

technology that lets you put an atom exactly where you want it. It is the ultimate nanotechnology.”

Prof Jay Keasling of the University of California at Berkeley described how the technology was being used to make an important anti-malaria drug, artemisinin, more cheaply than taking it from its original plant source.

Synthetic biologists were however “keenly aware” of concerns about unintentional harm.

“We have to be aware about all the issues about safety and security and because of that we are involved in public education,” Prof Keasling said.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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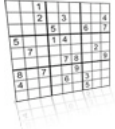
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