

March 11, 2003

The Honorable Dede Alpert
Chair, Senate Select Committee on Genetics,
Genetic Technologies and Public Policy
State Capitol
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Senator Alpert:

Thank you for convening an important informational hearing on Eugenics: Lessons from a History Hiding in Plain Sight.

While the 20th Century brought many scientific advances, some examples of science gone awry during that period still have the power to shock and dismay. California history sadly records one such episode: the practice of eugenics as state policy.

California policymakers and even then-Attorney General U.S. Webb mistakenly upheld the popular belief that selective breeding could improve the human species. The state law enacted in 1909 by Governor James Gillett reportedly resulted in the sterilization, between 1909 and 1964, of more than 20,000 men and women considered feeble-minded or prone to moral perversions. Victims of this false science included the disabled, who were forcibly denied the ability to have children. California was not alone. Thirty-two other states had similar laws.

I cannot change the past, but as Attorney General, I am moved to offer an apology for the injustice done to California men and women when the state permitted and promoted involuntary sterilization. This is a good time for our state to renounce for all time the ill-considered opinion of former California Attorney General Webb who saw “no legal inhibitions upon this enlightened piece of legislation . . .”

It is never too late to search our conscience, to protest discrimination, and to reject injustice inflicted by public policy or statute on helpless minorities. At the dawn of an era when cloning and genetic engineering offer both great promise and great peril, we must learn from our history, teach our children about our past and be mindful for our future. The apology offered

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today speaks to the past bigotry and intolerance against the disabled, developmentally disabled or others who happened to be seen as misfits of the time. It also stands as a warning to policymakers of the 21st century. We must remember and honor our common humanity and treat people with respect, no matter their race, ethnicity, religious belief, economic status, disability or illness.

Sincerely,

BILL LOCKYER
Attorney General