# The Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor

## Executive Summary

The Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor provides an annual 'snapshot' of public perceptions of technological change. Each year it includes an in-depth focus on one particular technology: this year the focus is on DNA paternity testing. The Monitor is based on a national survey of 1000 Australians and six focus groups. The main findings of the 2003 Monitor are:

### 1. Public Perceptions of Technological Change

- Australians are comfortable with the rate of technological change. Our level of comfort is very similar to that of Americans.
- Australians are uncertain about whether or not science and technology are 'out of control', and believe they should be regulated by governments.
- Most Australians strongly trust CSIRO, universities, hospitals and scientists for information about new technologies. They are somewhat trusting of small business, the environmental movement and the public service. They do not trust governments, major companies, trade unions or the media.
- Australians are more comfortable with some technologies than others. They are very comfortable with the Internet and mobile phones; they are fairly comfortable with stem cell research; they are unsure about pharmaceutical technologies; but they are not comfortable with biological engineering technologies.
- The strongest predictor of comfort with new technologies is age. Younger Australians are significantly more comfortable than older Australians. Other significant variables (in order) are religious affiliation, life satisfaction, education and gender.

### 2. Focus on DNA Paternity Testing

- Most Australians are comfortable with DNA paternity testing, just as they are comfortable with other 'established' new technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones.
- DNA paternity testing without the knowledge of the mother is controversial – but men and women are divided to the same extent.
- Australians depend mainly upon the media for information about DNA paternity testing. In turn, they mostly understand DNA paternity testing in terms of 'paternity fraud'.
- Men from fathers' rights groups see DNA paternity testing as a means to 'expose' the truth and counter 'paternity fraud'. They believe in the absolute right of fathers to test for paternity without permission from the courts or their ex-partners.
- Women who have been obliged to enforce DNA paternity testing in order to obtain child support see the tests as a weapon for 'angry men' to punish their former partners. They believe in the importance of regulating access to the tests.

# Introduction

## Background

We are living during a time of rapid technological change. Emerging technologies – notably information and life science technologies – have profound social, political and ethical implications. Public perceptions of emerging technologies are potentially volatile, as demonstrated in the controversies around genetically modified foods and stem cell research.

The Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor was developed by the Australian Centre for Emerging Technologies and Society (ACETS) at Swinburne University of Technology. It provides an annual 'snapshot' of public perceptions regarding new technologies in Australia.

The 2003 Monitor is the inaugural edition of the Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor. It provides a benchmark for future editions. The Monitor will provide an opportunity to understand how and why public perceptions change in relation to new technologies.

This report was prepared by ACETS in association with Peak Performers. It was supported by a grant from the Chancellery Strategic Grants Scheme at Swinburne University of Technology. It was also assisted by a grant from the Public Awareness Grants Program in the Victorian Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development.

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## The Monitor

The Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor involves:

- A general account of public perceptions about new technologies in Australia, including trust in institutions that provide information about new technologies.
- An in-depth profile on public perceptions about one technology in particular. Each year the Monitor adopts a different focus. In 2003 the Monitor focuses on DNA paternity testing.

The Monitor employs quantitative and qualitative methods. More specifically, it includes:

- A national random survey of 1000 Australians, providing scope for generalisation.
- Focus groups on the special topic. In 2003 six focus groups were conducted on DNA paternity testing.

The 2003 national survey was conducted by ACETS with the assistance of the Australian Survey Research Infrastructure Network (ASRIN). The focus groups were held at the ACETS research facility.

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## Focus on DNA Paternity Testing

DNA paternity testing is an application of DNA identity testing. It involves testing of biological material from a child and his or her putative father to establish their biological relationship.

The 2003 Monitor focussed upon DNA paternity testing for 3 reasons:

1. Biotechnology is the most controversial of the new technologies at the moment. DNA paternity testing has been around since the mid 1980s, and is therefore a relatively established application of biotechnology. It makes a valuable case study concerning changing perceptions of biotechnology.
2. DNA paternity testing means that for the first time in human history it is now possible to identify biological fathers with relative certainty. This has significant implications for the family and family policy.
3. Governments around the world – including the Australian government – are currently in the process of considering an appropriate policy framework for DNA paternity testing, in particular the conditions under which testing should be permitted.

The 2003 Monitor is the first study of public perceptions about DNA paternity testing in the world.

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## The Survey

Participants in the national survey were asked:

- How comfortable they were about the current rate of technological change.
- How comfortable they were in relation to various technologies, ranging from relatively 'established' technologies (such as the Internet) to ones that are still speculative (such as using animals to grow human organs for transplant).
- The extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements about the benefits and risks of science and technology.
- How much they trusted various institutions, organisations and groups for information about new technologies.
- How comfortable they were in relation to DNA paternity testing under a variety of conditions.

Comfort with technologies was measured on an eleven point Likert scale where 0=not at all comfortable and 10=very comfortable. Agreement with statements about science and technology were measured on the same scale where 0=strongly disagree and 10=strongly agree.

Trust was measured on a 6 point Likert scale where 0=don't trust at all and 5=trust a very great deal. An 'unsure' category was also included.

Participants were also asked demographic and personal questions about:

- Age
- Gender
- Employment status
- Occupation
- Income
- Country of birth
- Parents' country of birth
- State of residence
- Voting behaviour
- Computer and Internet use
- Life satisfaction

The 2003 Monitor included 1044 respondents. The sample was selected on a random basis, and matched the 2001 Census in most respects. There was some overrepresentation of women, the elderly and the tertiary educated.

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## The focus groups

Participants in the focus groups were asked:

- How much they knew about DNA paternity testing.
- The extent to which they would be confident in the results of a DNA paternity test.
- The situations where they thought DNA paternity testing would be a good idea.
- Whether there were negative aspects of DNA paternity testing.
- Who they believed should provide consent for a DNA paternity test.
- Their views on a scenario where a doctor discovered misattributed paternity in the course of a DNA health-related test, and the appropriate course of action.
- Their views on the importance of biological fatherhood.

The 2003 Monitor included 6 focus groups, 3 consisting of women and 3 of men. Four of the focus groups were recruited on the basis of education.

The remaining two focus groups consisted of individuals with a special stake in DNA paternity testing. One of the men's groups consisted of fathers' rights activists. One of the women's groups consisted of women who had been required to enforce DNA paternity testing in order to become eligible for child support.

The questions asked of the stakeholder groups were tailored to address their specific experiences and concerns.

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# KEY FINDINGS

## PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

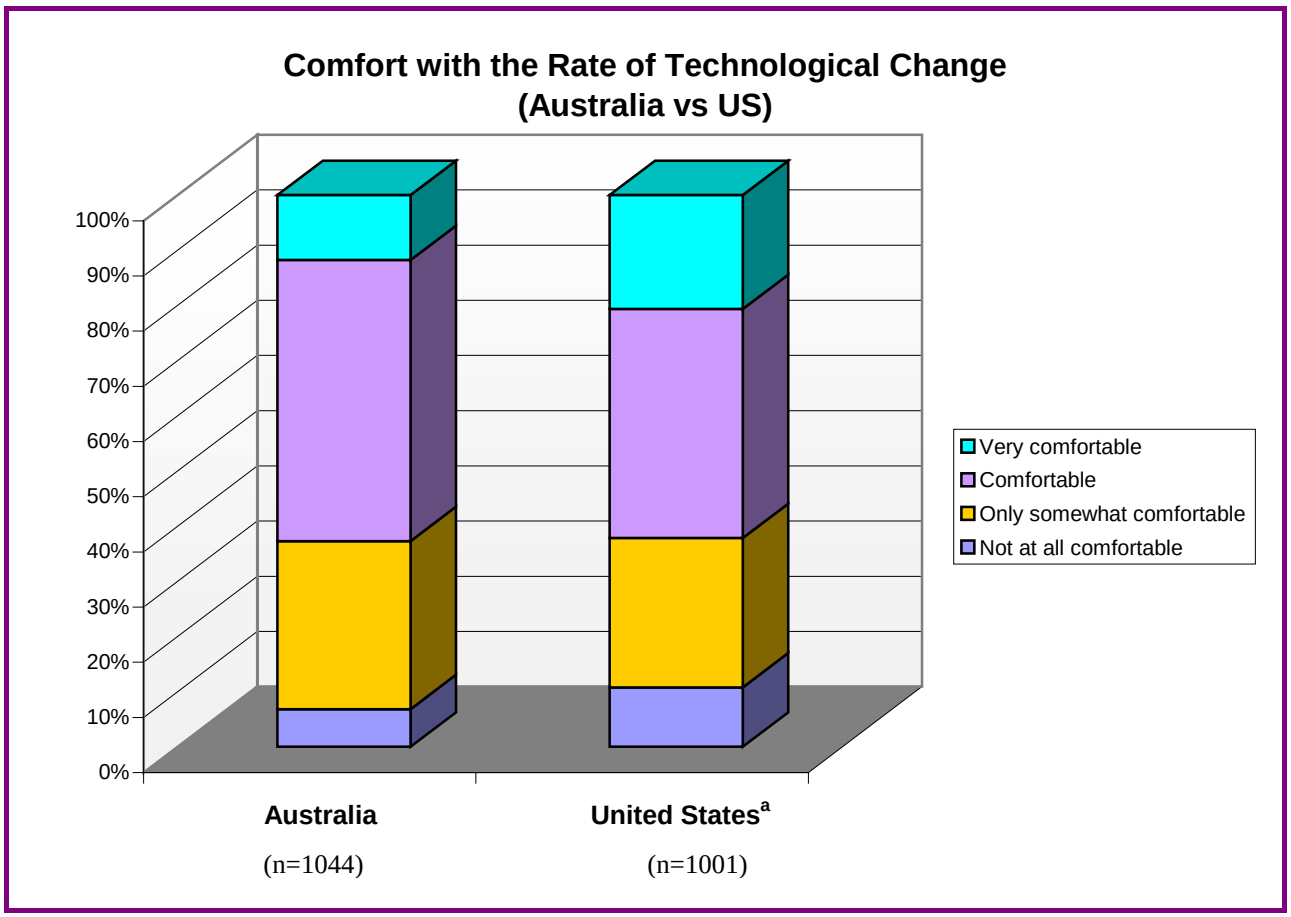
- Australians are comfortable with the rate of technological change. Our level of comfort is very similar to that of Americans.
- Australians are uncertain about whether or not science and technology are 'out of control', and believe they should be regulated by government.
- Australians strongly trust CSIRO, universities, hospitals and scientists for information about new technologies. They are somewhat trusting of small business, the environmental movement and the public service. They do not trust governments, major companies, trade unions or the media.
- Australians are more comfortable with some technologies than others. They are very comfortable with the Internet and mobile phones; they are fairly comfortable with stem cell research; they are unsure about pharmaceutical technologies; but they are not comfortable with biological engineering technologies.
- The strongest predictor of comfort with new technologies is age. Younger Australians are significantly more comfortable than older Australians. Other significant variables (in order) are religious affiliation, life satisfaction, education and gender.

# 1. COMFORT WITH NEW TECHNOLOGIES

**AUSTRALIANS ARE COMFORTABLE WITH THE RATE OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE. OUR LEVEL OF COMFORT IS VERY SIMILAR TO THAT OF AMERICANS.**

Australians are comfortable with the rate of technological change. On a scale of 0 (not at all comfortable) to 10 (very comfortable), the average score of respondents was 6.90.

Australians and Americans have similar levels of comfort with the rate of technological change. The majority of both populations are comfortable or very comfortable, although Americans have a greater proportion of people feeling very comfortable with the rate of change, and a slightly greater proportion feeling very uncomfortable.

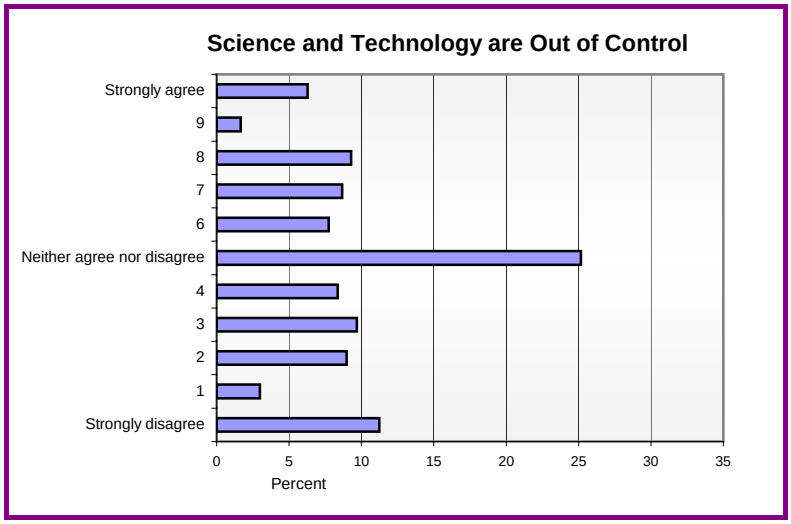



[a] Data from Genie Project National study, Center for Science, Policy and Outcomes (CSPO), Columbia University, February 2002

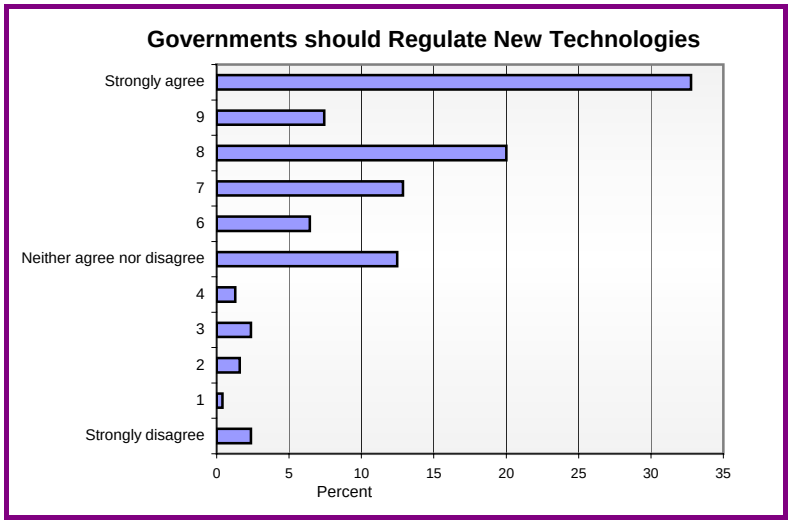
# 2. SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY 'OUT OF CONTROL'

**AUSTRALIANS ARE UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHETHER SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY ARE 'OUT OF CONTROL' AND BELIEVE THEY SHOULD BE REGULATED BY GOVERNMENT.**

When asked whether 'science and technology are out of control, and beyond the control of governments', the average score of respondents - on a scale of 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) - was 4.9. People with a very low income (less than $15,600) moderately agreed that science and technology are out of control. No other income groups agreed with the statement.




When asked whether 'it is important for governments to regulate new technologies', the average score of respondents was 7.6.

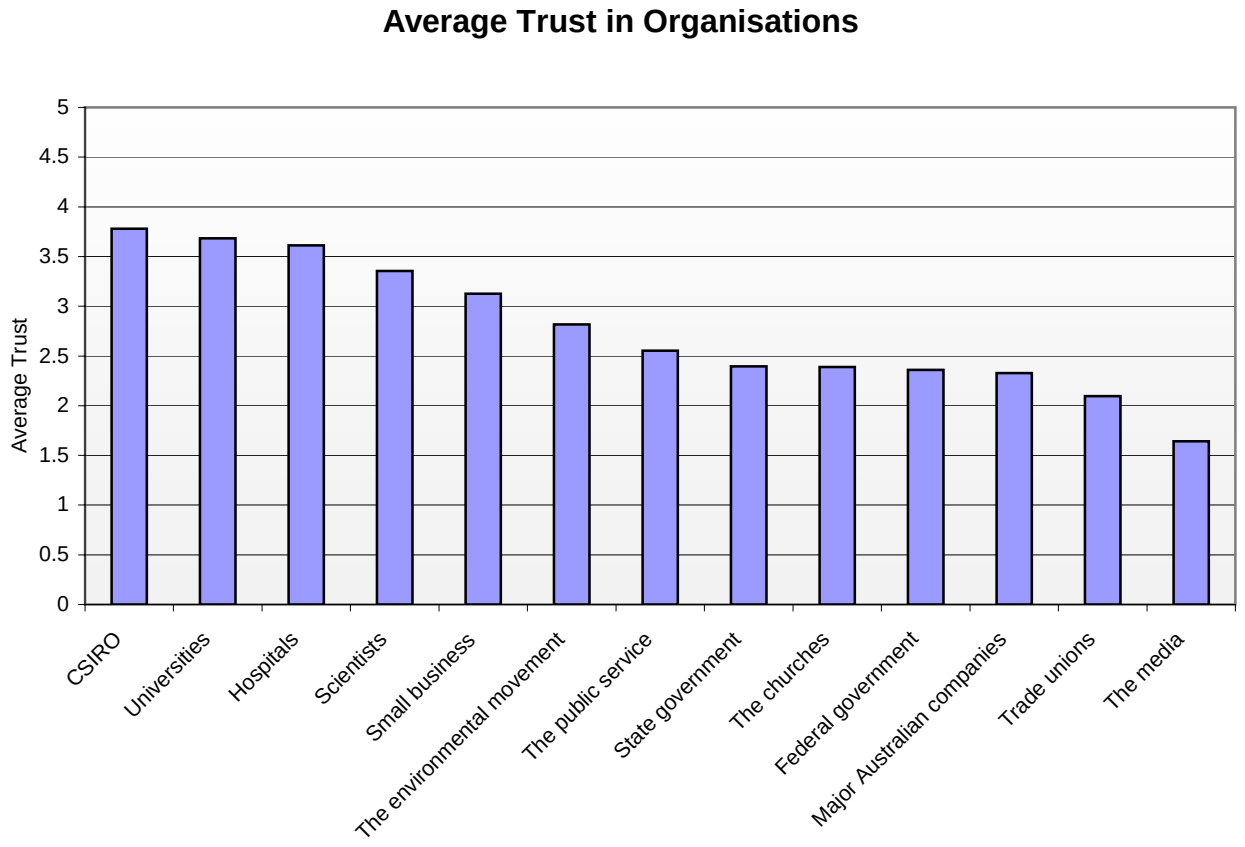


# 3. TRUST IN ORGANISATIONS

**AUSTRALIANS TRUST SOME ORGANISATIONS AND GROUPS MORE THAN OTHERS FOR INFORMATION ABOUT NEW TECHNOLOGIES.**

When asked about which organisations and groups they trust for information on new technologies - on a scale of 0 (don't trust at all) to 5 (trust a very great deal) - Australians say that they:

- **Trust CSIRO, universities, hospitals and scientists the most.**
- **Somewhat trust small business, the environmental movement and the public service.**
- **Do not trust governments, churches, major companies, trade unions or the media.**

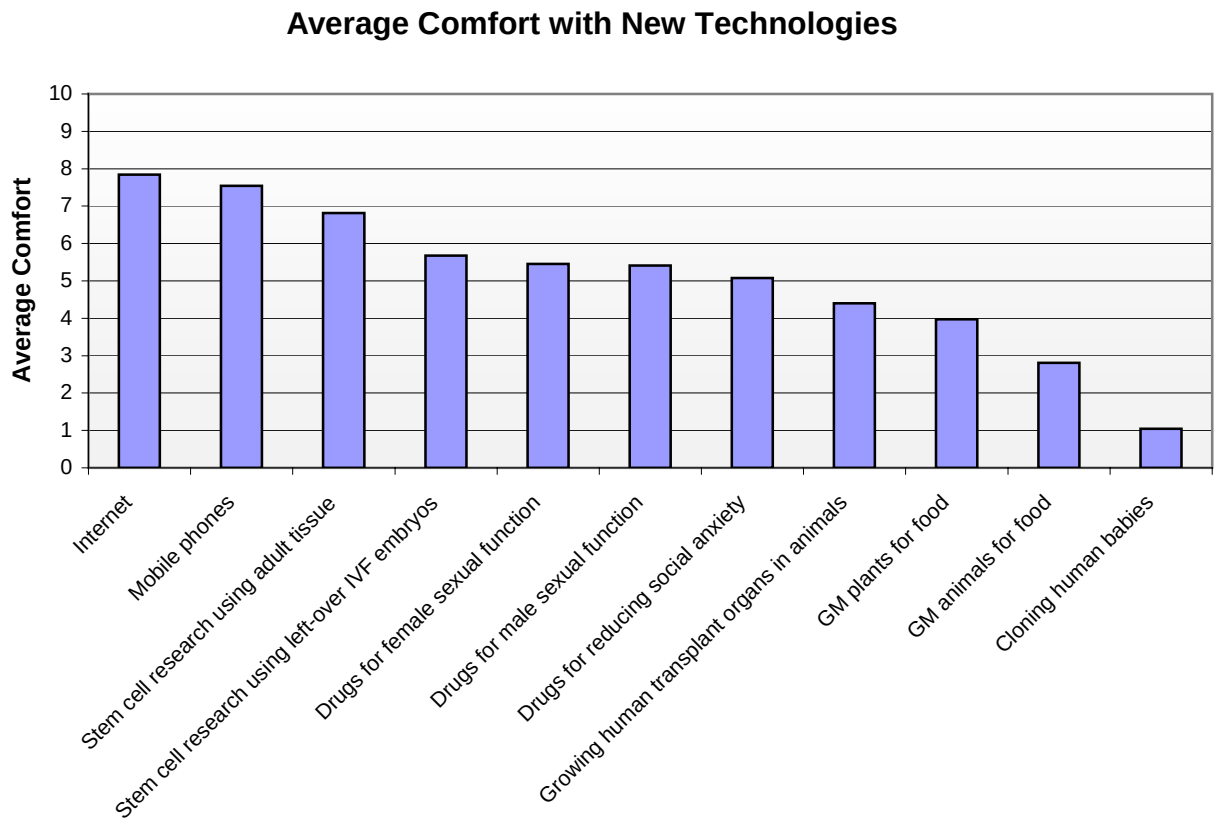


# 4. DIFFERENT COMFORT WITH DIFFERENT TECHNOLOGIES

**AUSTRALIANS ARE MORE COMFORTABLE WITH SOME TECHNOLOGIES THAN OTHERS.**

Australians generally feel:

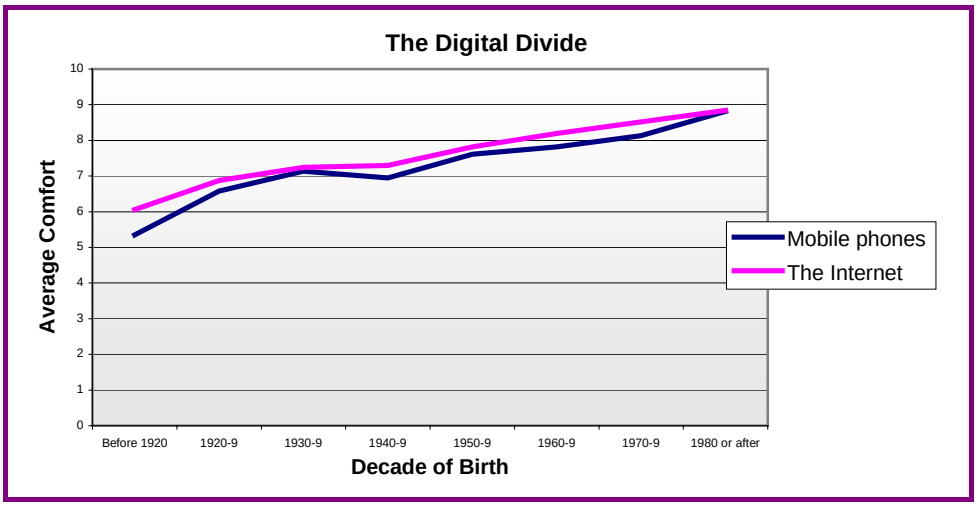
- **Very comfortable with the Internet and mobile phones.**
- **Reasonably comfortable with stem cell research using tissue from adults or leftover IVF embryos.**
- **Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable about drugs for enhancing both male and female sexual function and drugs for reducing social anxiety.**
- **Uncomfortable with genetically engineered plants and animals for food, using animals to grow human organs for transplant, and cloning human babies.**



## 4.1 THERE IS EVIDENCE OF A DIGITAL DIVIDE IN AUSTRALIA. IT IS GROUNDED IN AGE AND SOCIAL CLASS, BUT NOT GENDER.

**Age**

Older people indicate significantly less comfort with both mobile phones and the Internet than do people of their children's and grandchildren's age.




**Education**

Australians with less than year 12 schooling are significantly less comfortable with both mobile phones and the Internet than Australians with a higher level of education. Those with year 12 are less comfortable with the Internet than Australians with a higher level of education.

**Income**

Australians with an income over $41,599 are significantly more comfortable with the Internet and mobile phones than those with an income under $15,599.

**Life Satisfaction**

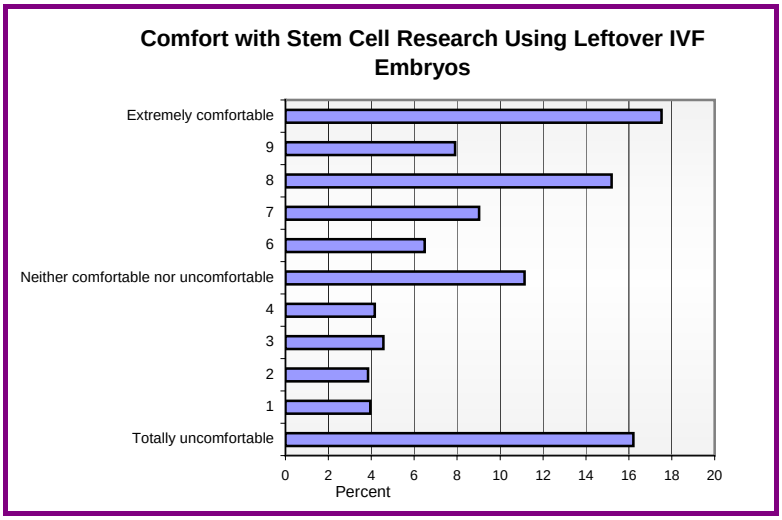
Australians who are more satisfied with their lives are also significantly more comfortable with mobile phones and the Internet.

**Gender**

Men and women are equally comfortable with the Internet and mobile phones.

## 4.2 AUSTRALIANS ARE GENERALLY COMFORTABLE WITH STEM CELL RESEARCH, BUT THEY ARE POLARISED WHEN STEM CELL RESEARCH INVOLVES USING LEFTOVER IVF EMBRYOS.

When asked how comfortable they were with stem cell research using leftover IVF embryos, the average score of respondents - on a scale of 0 (totally uncomfortable) to 10 (extremely comfortable) - was 5.7.




**Gender**

Australian men are significantly more comfortable than women regarding stem cell research using leftover IVF embryos.

**Religion**

Anglicans, Presbyterians and those with no religion are significantly more comfortable with the research than Catholics, Baptists and Lutherans. Australians who attend church at least once a week are much less comfortable than other Australians with stem cell research using leftover IVF embryos.

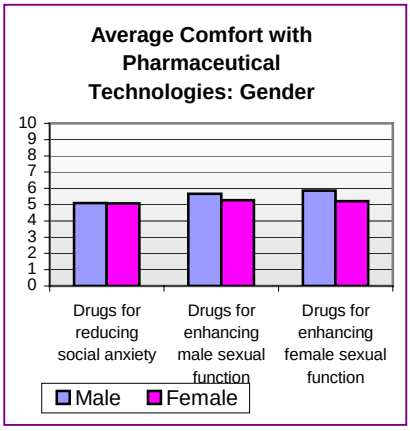
**Computer**

Australians who use a home computer are significantly more comfortable with stem cell research using leftover IVF embryos than those who do not.

## 4.3 AUSTRALIANS ARE UNCERTAIN ABOUT DRUGS USED FOR REDUCING SOCIAL ANXIETY AND ENHANCING SEXUAL FUNCTION.

Most Australians are neither comfortable nor uncomfortable about pharmaceutical drugs for reducing social anxiety and enhancing sexual function.

There are a number of demographic variables that divide Australians on these issues.




**Gender**

Men and Women do not differ in their comfort regarding drugs for reducing social anxiety. Men are significantly more comfortable than women regarding drugs for enhancing either male or female sexual function, but the differences are still small.

**Age**

Australians in their 30s are significantly more comfortable with drugs for enhancing male or female sexual function than their parents' generation (born in the 1940s). Australians aged in their 70s and 80s are very uncomfortable with these drugs.

**Income**

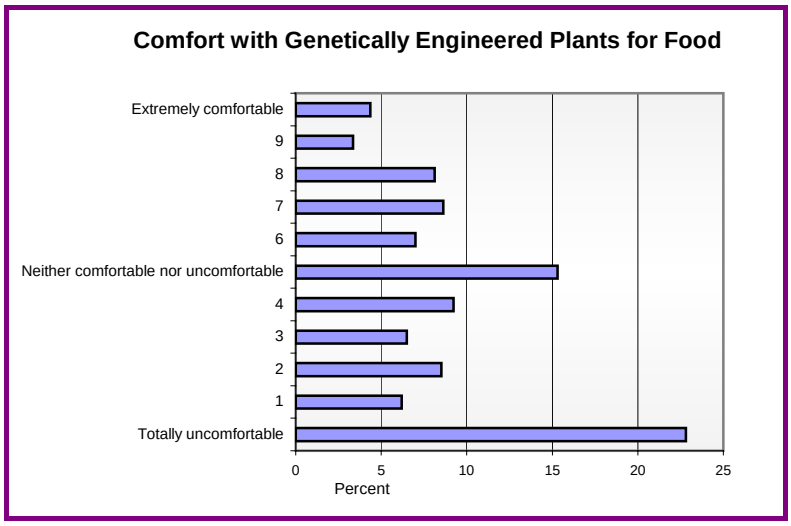
Australians with an income under $15,600 are significantly less comfortable with drugs for enhancing male or female sexual function than those with a higher income.

**Religion**

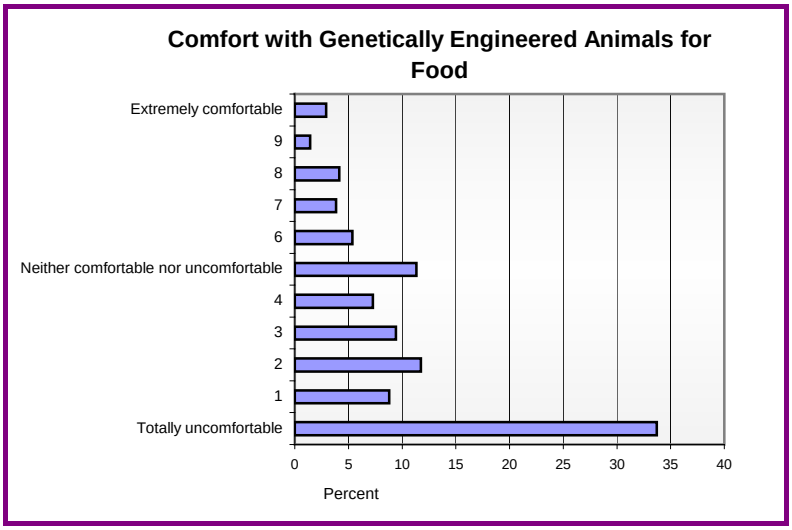
Australians who attend church at least once a week, irrespective of denomination, are significantly less comfortable than other Australians with drugs for enhancing male or female sexual function. Catholics and Anglicans are moderately comfortable with these drugs, but Uniting Church members are uncomfortable.

## 4.4 MOST AUSTRALIANS ARE NOT COMFORTABLE WITH GENETIC ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGIES, BUT THEIR VIEWS ARE POLARISED REGARDING GENETICALLY ENGINEERED PLANTS FOR FOOD.

The single largest group of participants in the survey (22%) was not at all comfortable with genetically engineered plants for food. The second largest group (15%) was uncommitted. About one-third of the participants were comfortable to a greater or lesser extent with genetically engineered plants for food.

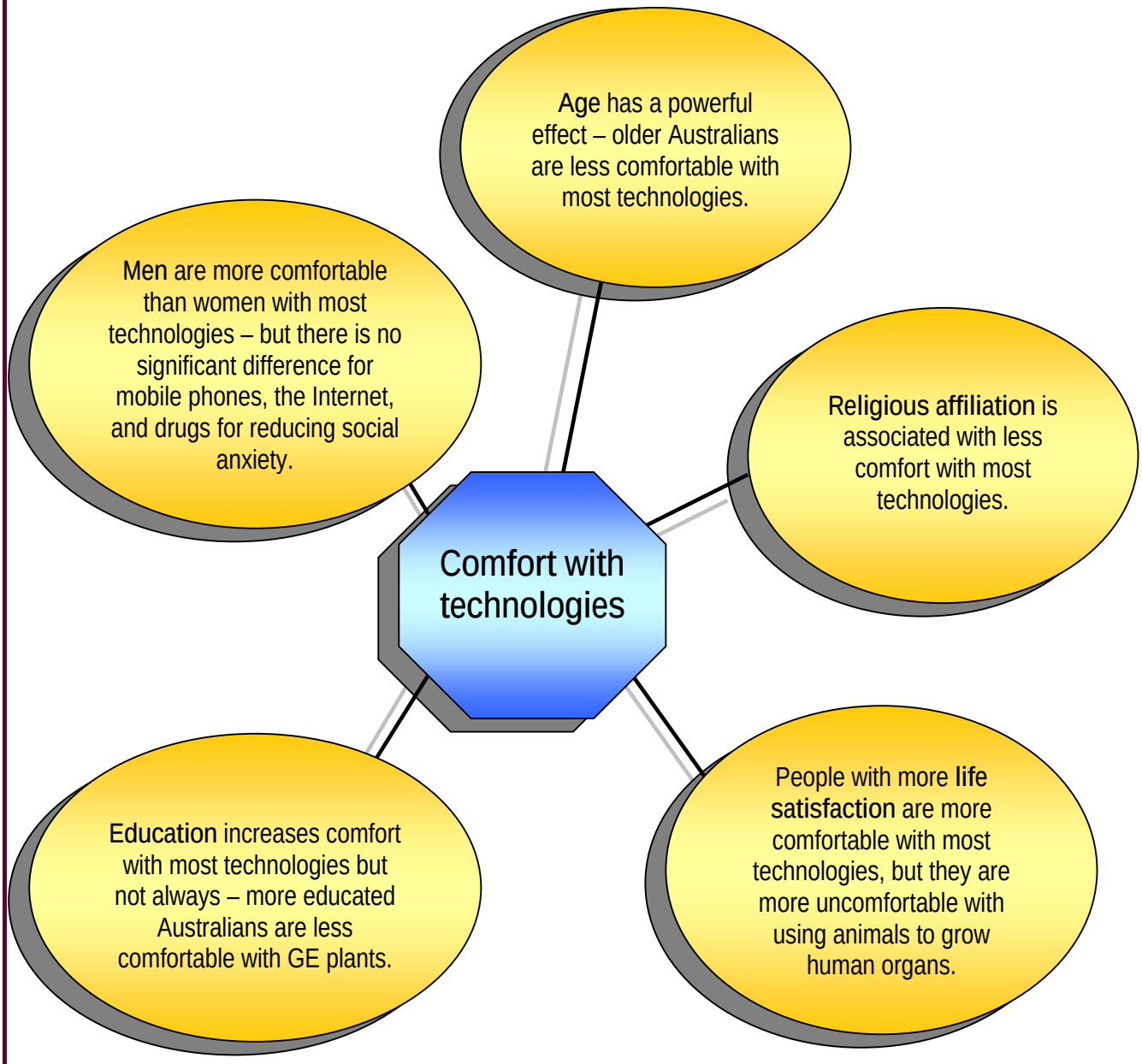



There was no such polarisation in relation to genetically engineered animals for food. Only 12.5% of participants were comfortable with this technology.



# 5. PREDICTORS OF COMFORT

**AGE IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT PREDICTOR FOR FEELING COMFORTABLE ABOUT NEW TECHNOLOGIES. AFTER AGE, THE MOST SIGNIFICANT VARIABLES ARE (IN ORDER) RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION, LIFE SATISFACTION, EDUCATION AND GENDER.**



# KEY FINDINGS

## FOCUS ON DNA PATERNITY TESTING

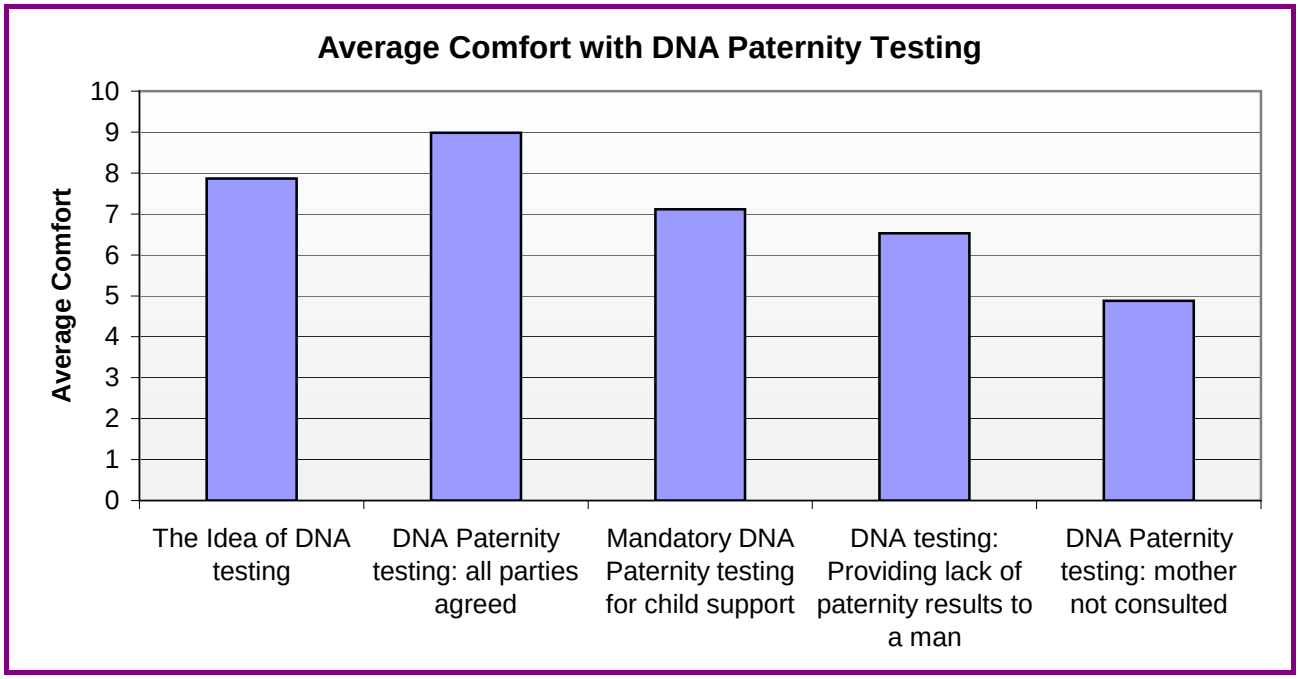
- Most Australians are comfortable with DNA paternity testing, just as they are comfortable with other 'established' new technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones.
- DNA paternity testing without the knowledge of the mother is controversial – but men and women are divided to the same extent.
- Australians depend mainly upon the media for information about DNA paternity testing. In turn, they mostly understand DNA paternity testing in terms of 'paternity fraud'.
- Men from fathers' rights groups see DNA paternity testing as a means to 'expose' the truth and counter 'paternity fraud'. They believe in the absolute right of fathers to test for paternity without permission from the courts or their ex-partners.
- Women who have been obliged to enforce DNA paternity testing in order to obtain child support see the tests as a weapon for 'angry men' to punish their former partners. They believe in the importance of regulating access to the tests.

# 1. COMFORT WITH DNA PATERNITY TESTING

**MOST AUSTRALIANS ARE COMFORTABLE WITH DNA PATERNITY TESTING, JUST AS THEY ARE COMFORTABLE WITH OTHER 'ESTABLISHED' NEW TECHNOLOGIES SUCH AS THE INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONES.**

Australians feel:

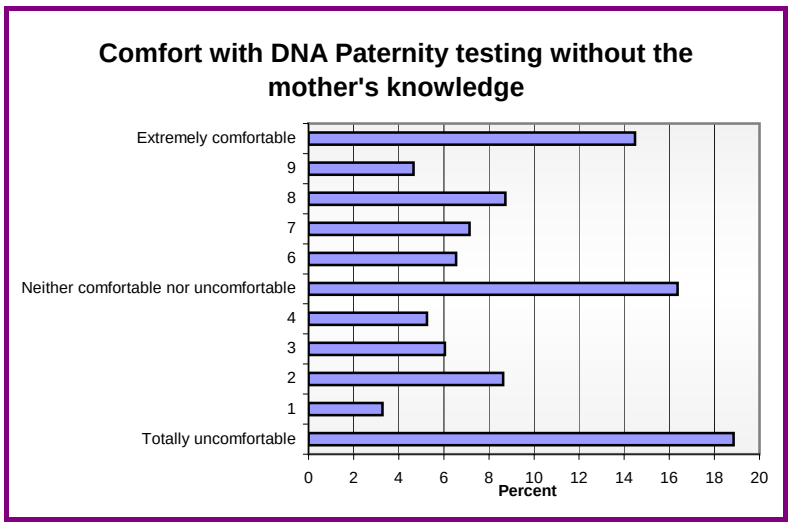
- **Very comfortable about DNA testing in general.**
- **Extremely comfortable about DNA paternity testing where all parties have consented to the test.**
- **Fairly comfortable about mandatory DNA paternity testing to enforce child support.**
- **Somewhat comfortable about revealing lack of paternity to the father as a result of a genetic test for health reasons.**
- **Uncertain about DNA paternity testing without the knowledge of the mother.**

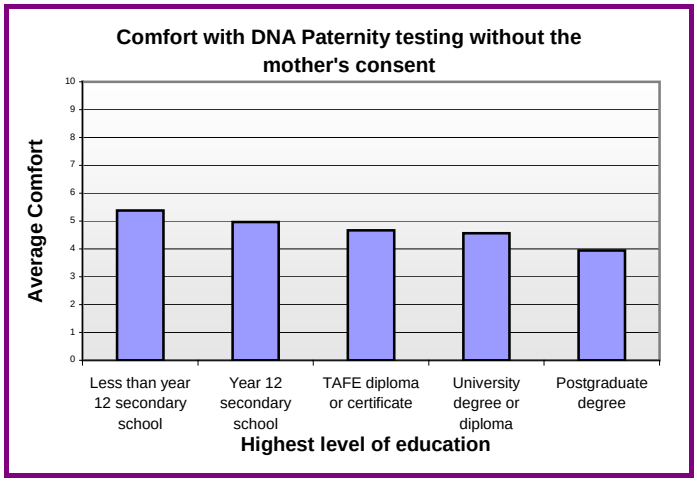


# 2. DNA PATERNITY TESTING WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE MOTHER

**DNA PATERNITY TESTING WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE MOTHER IS CONTROVERSIAL – BUT MEN AND WOMEN ARE DIVIDED TO THE SAME EXTENT.**

When asked how comfortable they are about 'DNA testing of a father and child to see whether he actually is the father – where the test is conducted without the knowledge of the mother', the average score of respondents - on a scale of 0 (not at all comfortable) to 10 (very comfortable) - was 4.9, with substantial polarisation.




Education

Education was the only variable that significantly influenced Australians' attitudes on this issue. Australians with less than year 12 education were more comfortable with DNA paternity testing without the mothers' knowledge than those with tertiary qualifications.

Gender

It might be expected that men and women would have different views on this issue. This was not the case. There was no significant difference between the views of men and women.

# 3. THE MEDIA AND 'PATERNITY FRAUD'

**AUSTRALIANS DEPEND UPON THE MEDIA FOR INFORMATION ABOUT DNA PATERNITY TESTING. IN TURN, THEY MOSTLY UNDERSTAND THE TESTS IN TERMS OF 'PATERNITY FRAUD'.**

Focus groups recruited on the basis of education – the 'general public' focus groups - indicated that knowledge about DNA paternity testing overwhelmingly came from the media. None of the participants in the 'general public' focus groups had personal experience of DNA paternity testing. Only one participant knew somebody who had undergone a DNA paternity test.

Participants mentioned:

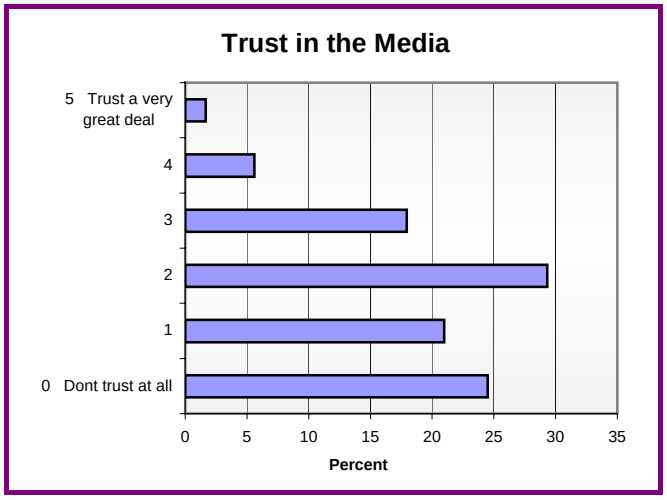
- **American talk shows, such as Jerry Springer and Ricki Lake**
- **TV dramas, such as *Stingers, CSI* and *The Bold and the Beautiful***
- **TV advertisements for commercial DNA paternity services**
- **Newspaper and TV current affairs coverage**

In turn, participants – women and men – overwhelmingly understood DNA paternity testing in terms of 'paternity fraud', or women who deceived their husbands. This is the scenario that is most prominent in the media.

Several participants acknowledged other scenarios, where fathers wanted to avoid child support payments or punish their former partners. Other scenarios were the exception, not the rule.

It is striking that in the national survey, most respondents were comfortable with DNA paternity testing, but they did not trust the media as a source of information about new technology.

The implication is that people *say* that they do not trust the media, but in fact the media nonetheless influences their perception of new technologies.



# 4. FATHERS' RIGHTS AND 'PATERNITY FRAUD'

**MEN FROM FATHERS' RIGHTS GROUPS SEE DNA PATERNTIY TESTS AS A MEANS TO 'EXPOSE' THE TRUTH AND COUNTER 'PATERNITY FRAUD'. THEY BELIEVE IN THE ABSOLUTE RIGHT OF FATHERS TO TEST FOR PATERNITY WITHOUT PERMISSION FROM THE COURTS OR THEIR EX-PARTNERS.**

Focus groups with men and women who had a personal stake in DNA paternity testing revealed much more strongly held opinions on this issue.

The men's focus group consisted of men from fathers' rights organisations. These men - like the participants in the 'general public' focus groups - overwhelmingly understood DNA paternity testing in terms of the 'paternity fraud' scenario.

The men believed that paternity fraud is widespread. They saw DNA paternity testing as a means to 'determine once and for all' the biological father of the child.

The men believed that the test should be viewed as having the same 'privacy as a pregnancy test'. That is, they believed – unlike the 'general public' focus groups - in the absolute right of fathers to test for paternity without permission from the courts or their ex-partners.

> *'At present one may organise a test and see the result without the child knowing. It allows you to then think the next step very carefully. Just because one is not the DNA father does not mean you wish to step out of the child's life.'* (Fred)

> *'Men are now aware that there are some women who are willing to use the parentage of children as a means of income. The old game of trapping a man through parentage has taken a new twist with Family Law and Child Support.'* (Madison)

> *'In any other case a person who passed off something as being not what it really is and took money for it could be charged with FRAUD. That is essentially [what] can occur and why DNA testing is important, so as to expose and counter such 'fraud'.* (Phil)

# 5. CHILD SUPPORT AND 'ANGRY MEN'

**WOMEN WHO HAVE HAD TO ENFORCE DNA PATERNITY TESTING IN ORDER TO OBTAIN CHILD SUPPORT SEE THE TESTS AS A WEAPON FOR 'ANGRY MEN' TO PUNISH THEIR FORMER PARTNERS. THEY BELIEVE IN THE IMPORTANCE OF REGULATING ACCESS TO THE TESTS.**

Not only do men and women with a personal stake in DNA paternity testing have much more strongly held views on the issue than the general public: their views are more polarised than those of the general public.

The women's stakeholder focus group consisted of women with personal experience of DNA paternity testing.

For these women, the scenario where women had deceived their husbands was irrelevant. The women in this focus group were obliged to undertake the test because the father of their child had denied paternity and they wanted access to child support payments.

For these women, the 'accuracy', 'validity' and 'confidentiality' of the test were all-important. The women wanted correct information provided through formal channels.

The women believed that men used paternity tests as a means to 'delay and thwart' access to child support payments, and as a 'way to punish their ex-partner, rather than out of any real concern about paternity'.

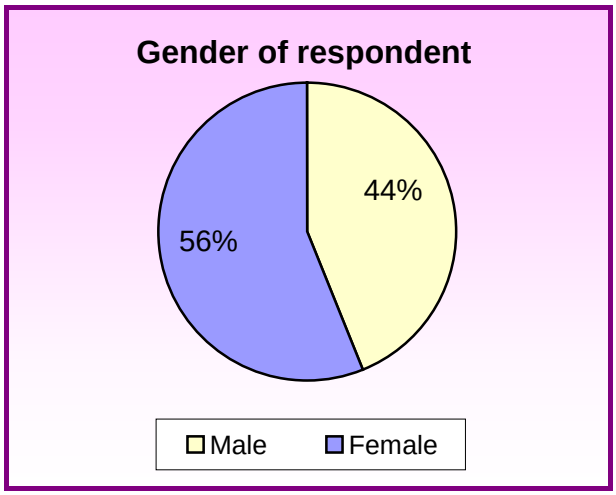
> *'The Child Support Agency advised me that I had to prove that the father was the father … my sole parent pension was suspended [and] I could get no child support, which was denied me because I had no proof of paternity. This all meant that it took me nearly 12 months to establish paternity – through Legal Aid I had to get a court order to get the father to take the test he was insisting was performed before he would sign the birth certificate.'* (Anne)

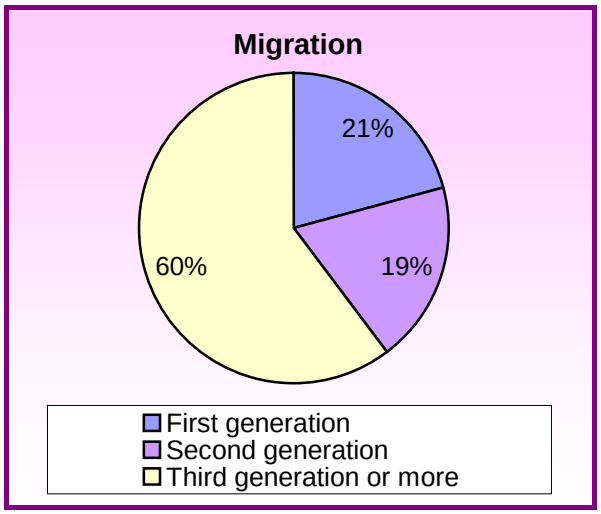
> *'Where the father denies paternity from the outset and the mother knows that he is the father, then it casts doubts about her in others' minds. (Those who don't know her will take his side). This can lead to low self-esteem and depression.'* (Sophie)

> *'I thought that the whole thing was a waste of my time and his money. I knew he was the father and felt that his need for paternity testing was a result of me leaving him. I do wonder whether it would have even been an issue if the technology hadn't been available.'* (Natalie)

## The National Survey Sample

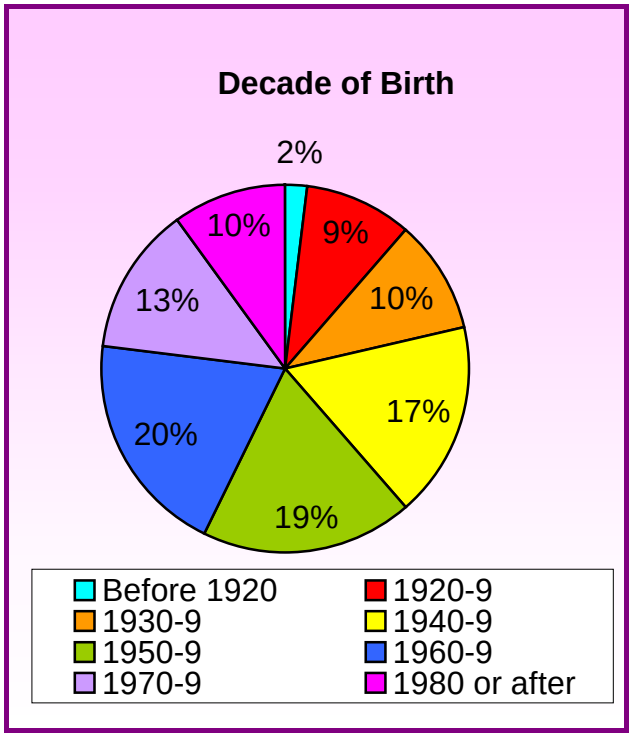
1044 respondents took part in the 2003 national survey. The following charts provide a graphical representation of the percentage of respondents in each demographic category.

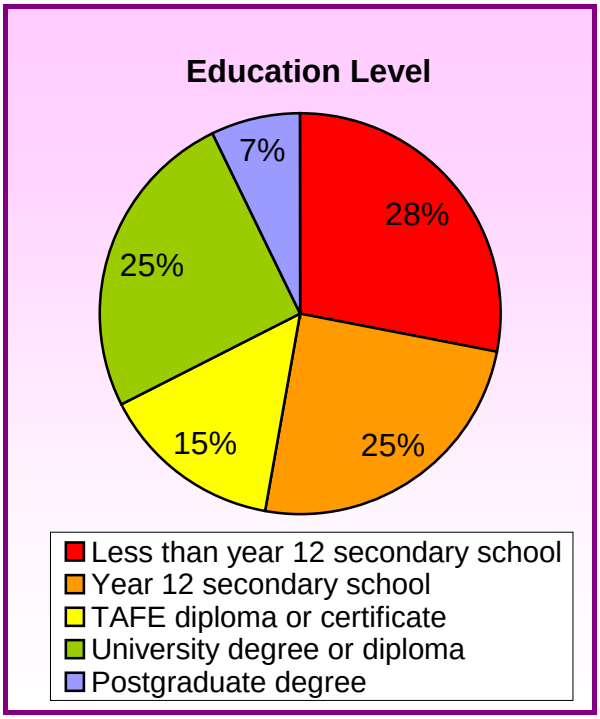


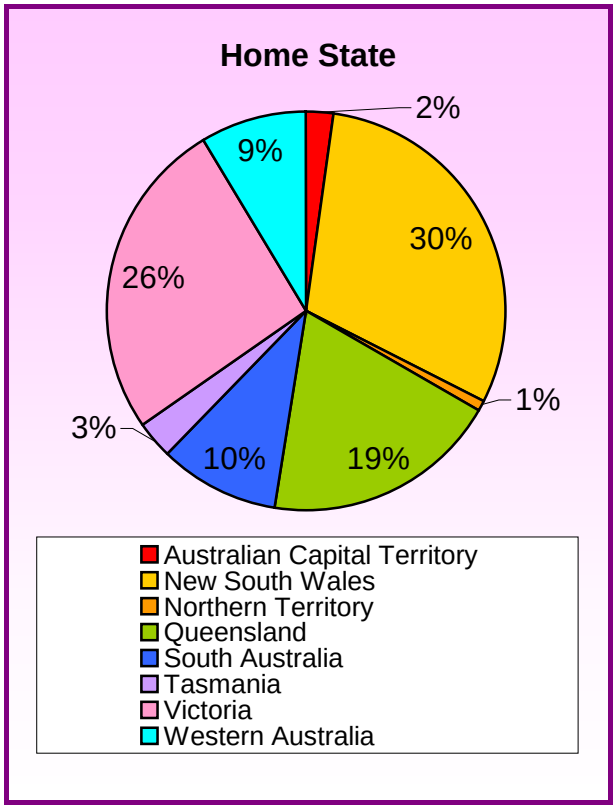




Forty-four percent of the sample were men and the average age of respondents was between 43 and 52 years.

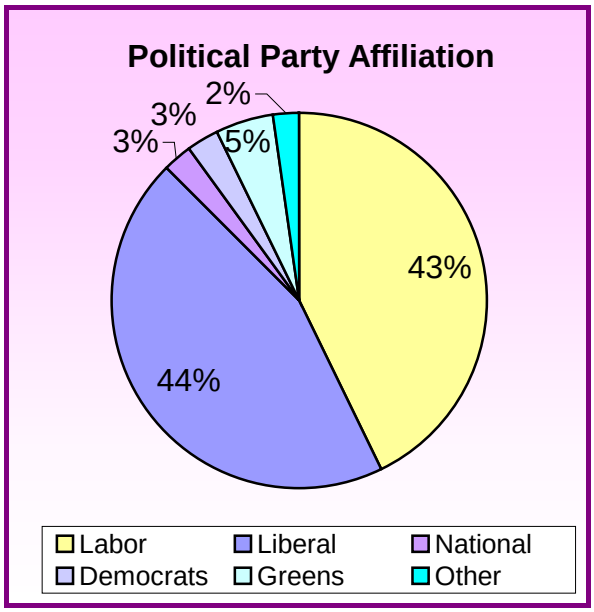
About one fifth (21%) of the sample was first-generation Australians, and another fifth (19%) was second generation, with one or two parents born overseas. Approximately half (47%) of the sample had completed tertiary education.

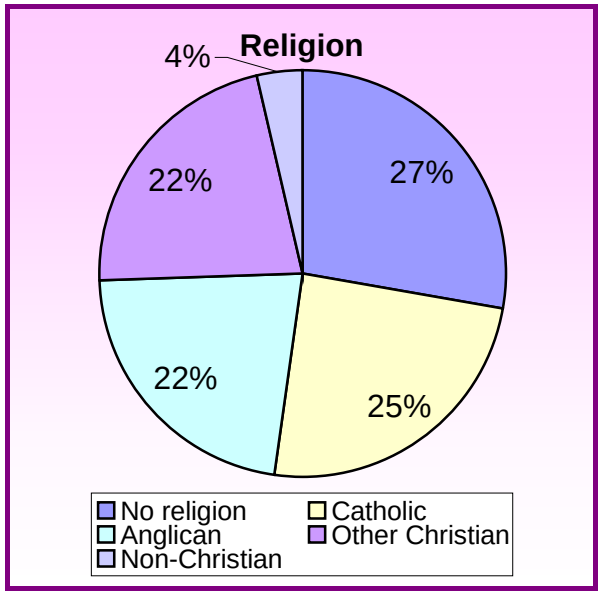


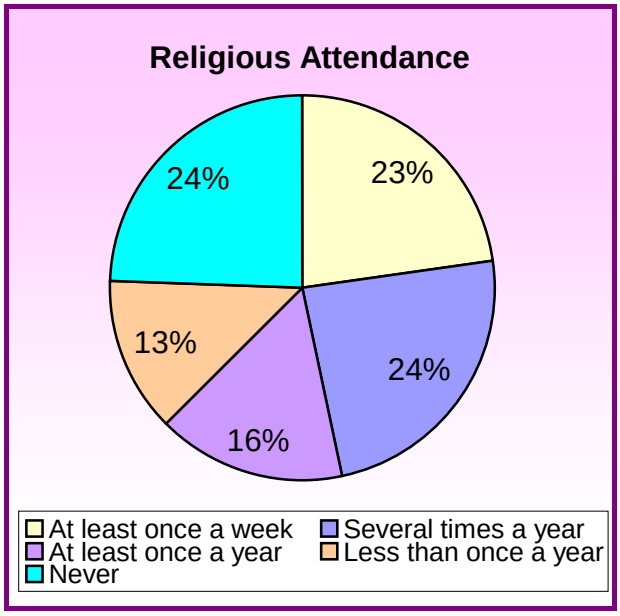


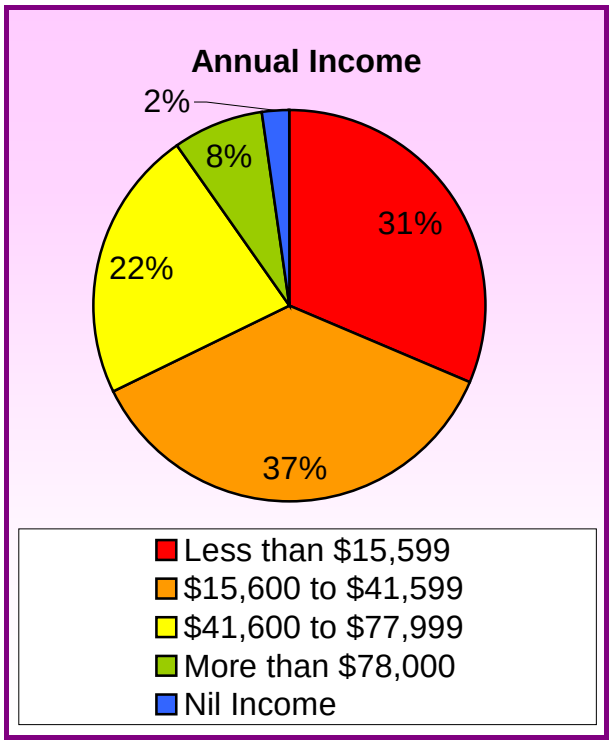

All states were represented in the sample. Forty-one percent of the sample declined to state a political affiliation, but of those who did, the majority were split evenly between Liberal and Labour affiliation.



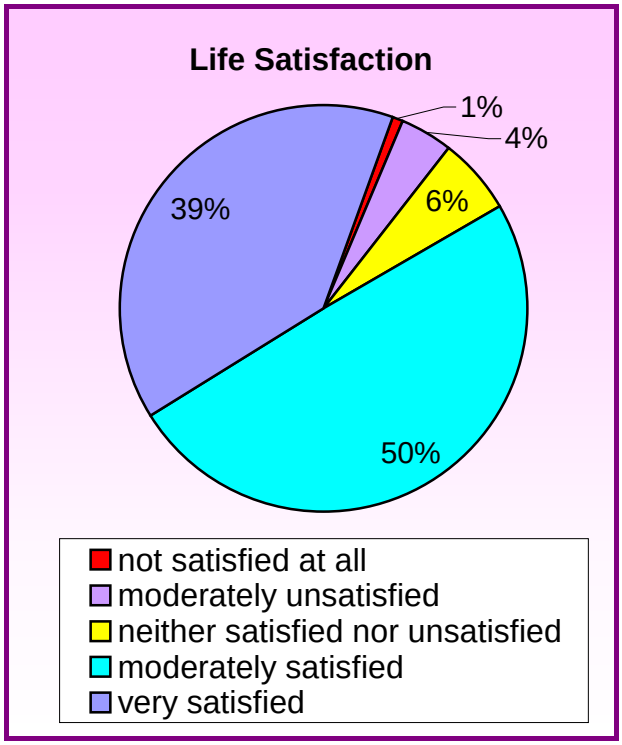



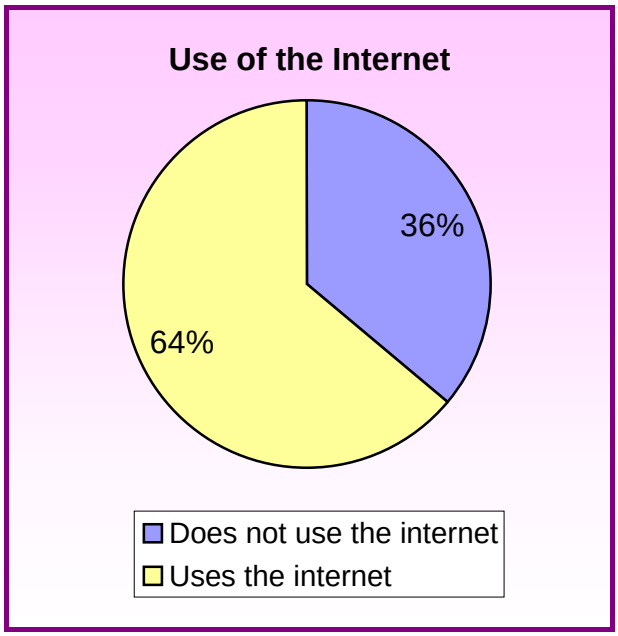

Approximately a quarter (27%) of the sample had no religious affiliation. Twenty eight percent of the sample declined to state their frequency of church attendance, but of those who did, roughly the same proportions attended church at least once a week, several times a year and never.



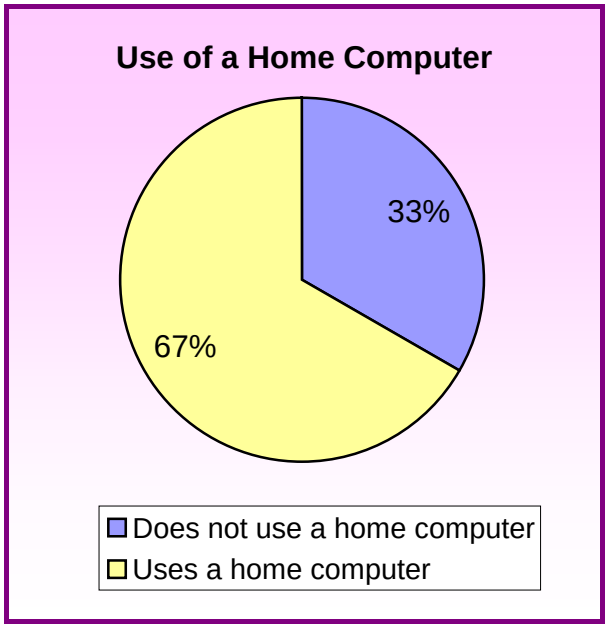



The average salary of the sample was between $15,600 and $41, 599. Nearly 90% of the sample were very or moderately satisfied with their lives.




The majority of the respondents use the Internet (64%) and a home computer (67%).

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## Focus Group Characteristics

The national survey was complemented by focus groups. The focus groups specifically addressed DNA paternity testing. Altogether six focus groups were conducted in June-July 2003.

Given the implications of DNA paternity testing for gender relationships, we were especially interested in the distinctive attitudes of men and women towards DNA paternity testing. Accordingly, three focus groups consisted of women and three consisted of men.

The national survey indicated that education was a significant variable in terms of attitudes towards DNA testing. Accordingly, two focus groups consisted of tertiary educated participants, and two consisted of non-tertiary educated participants.

Given that most people do not have direct experience of DNA paternity testing, we wanted to address the effects of being a stakeholder in the technology. Accordingly, two focus groups consisted of men and women with a personal stake in DNA paternity testing.

The men's focus group consisted of men who were involved in the fathers' rights movement, which has been outspoken in relation to public policy on DNA paternity testing. The women's group consisted of women who had been required to enforce DNA paternity testing in order to become eligible for child support.

The tertiary and non-tertiary groups consisted of 7-8 participants each, all from Melbourne. These four focus groups were conducted on a face-to-face basis. The male and female stakeholder groups consisted of 4 and 6 participants respectively, drawn from around Australia. These two focus groups were conducted through an Internet discussion board.

| | MEN | WOMEN | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| **TERTIARY EDUCATED** | Tertiary educated men (8 participants) | Tertiary educated women (8 participants) | **2** |
| **NON-TERTIARY** | Non-tertiary educated men (8 participants) | Non-tertiary educated women (7 participants) | **2** |
| **STAKEHOLDERS** | Men from the fathers' rights movement (4 participants) | Women with personal experience of testing (6 participants) | **2** |
| **TOTAL** | **3** | **3** | **6** |

## Further information

The ACETS online journal *The Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society (AJETS)* is coordinated with the Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor.

The first issue of *AJETS* includes two refereed articles, on which the Monitor is heavily based. The articles are:

- Gilding, M. and Critchley, C. 2003, 'Trust and technology: public perceptions of technological change in Australia', *AJETS,* No. 1. See: www.swin.edu.au/ajets

- Turney, L., Gilding, M., Critchley, C., Shields, P., Bakacs, L. and Butler, K. 2003, 'DNA paternity testing: public perceptions and the influence of gender', *AJETS,* No. 1. See: www.swin.edu.au/ajets

See these articles for more information on the findings of the Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor, including data analysis.

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## The Monitor team

The following individuals from ACETS (in alphabetical order) contributed towards data collection, analysis and presentation:

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Janet Wheeler

Andi Garing from Peak Performers made a major contribution towards data analysis and presentation.

## Acknowledgements

The Swinburne National Technology and Society Monitor was made possible through financial support from:

Chancellery Strategic Grants Scheme, Swinburne University of Technology
Public Awareness Grants Program, Victorian Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development

In particular, ACETS acknowledges the support and assistance of the following individuals (in alphabetical order):

Dr Betsy Blunsdon, ASRIN, Deakin University
Ms Ylva Carasone, Victorian Dept of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development
Ms Cynthia Determan, Center for Science, Policy and Outcomes, Columbia University
Mr Stephen Feinson, Center for Science, Policy and Outcomes, Columbia University
Mr John Mathews, Swinburne University of Technology
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