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Safe and Profitable Nanotechnologies Will Not Become Reality Unless Uncertainties Addressed

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Washington, D.C.—Nanotechnology holds tremendous potential—for breakthroughs in medicine, in the production of clean water and energy, and in computers and electronics. It may be the single most important advance of this new century.

But the effects of new technologies—both good and bad—do not recognize national borders. Equally, no one country has a monopoly on the resources and talent needed to explore whether the same novel properties that make nanomaterials so attractive for innovation could potentially lead to unforeseen health or environmental harm.

The *Nature* magazine article, “Safe Handling of Nanotechnology” (16 November 2006)—written by a highly respected international team of scientists from government, universities and industry—is a critical step forward in the necessary effort to safely manage nanotechnology’s benefits and risks.

Its five research “grand challenges” provide an essential starting point for governments, business and citizens’ groups to come together. It enables them to develop a focused and practical plan to find out which nanomaterials and nanotechnologies are likely not to cause harm, and which may be “greener” alternatives to materials and products currently in use. It also will help them in determining which nanomaterials may present risks, why they do, and how those risks might be assessed and controlled.

In the long run, safe and profitable nanotechnologies will not become a reality unless nanotechnology’s uncertainties are addressed systematically, effectively, and on a global basis. The authors of this *Nature* article put forward an authoritative outline of what that vital research agenda should be. It is a sound, comprehensive proposal that needs early attention. Delay can only mean larger costs—to consumers, businesses and governments—in the future.