

Media Release

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New Report on the Use of Embryos for Stem Cell Research Published

The Irish Council for Bioethics (ICB) is launching its report entitled ***Ethical, Scientific and Legal Issues Concerning Stem Cell Research: Opinion*** in the Royal Irish Academy, 19 Dawson Street, Dublin 2 on Wednesday 23rd April 2008 (1pm).

Few scientific issues today are as potentially promising and simultaneously controversial as stem cell research. Human stem cell research is a rapidly evolving field that holds out the promise of treating a variety of debilitating diseases and injuries e.g. Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, heart attacks or spinal cord injury. The pace at which developments are occurring is astonishing. It is, therefore, essential that the legal and ethical issues associated with this research be addressed.

It is for this reason that the ICB has spent 18 months preparing an opinion document on this important topic.

Main Conclusions of the Opinion:

1. The ICB is supportive of adult stem cell research, which is currently being conducted in Ireland and abroad, once it is conducted in accordance with relevant legislation and ethical guidelines.
2. The ICB believes that embryos should be granted significant moral status rather than full moral status. The moral value that embryos possess is based on the recognition of their potential to develop into persons, as well as the value they derive from representing human life in its earliest stages.
3. The ICB supports the carefully regulated use of embryos produced but not used during *in vitro* fertilisation (supernumerary), that are otherwise destined to be destroyed for the purpose of embryonic stem cell research aimed at alleviating human suffering.
4. The ICB does not object to the use of therapies or the importation of stem cells derived from embryos.
5. The ICB does not consider the creation of embryos specifically for research to be currently justified or proportionate, while supernumerary embryos exist. Should the number of supernumerary embryos decrease or if a patient-specific therapeutic potential of embryos created for research is achieved this position may need to be re-evaluated.
6. If the creation of embryos were deemed to be acceptable at some point in the future the Council would have no principled objection to the creation of human-animal hybrid cell lines*, which would obviate the concerns relating the exploitation of women for their eggs.
7. If on the basis of scientific evidence and economic analyses, umbilical cord banking were judged to be a useful investment for Irish healthcare, the ICB would support the establishment of a public umbilical cord blood bank, which would ensure equal access to benefits for all.

Dr Siobhán O'Sullivan, Scientific Director of the ICB said, "Ireland has no specific legislation relating to assisted human reproduction or embryo research. Failure to provide a comprehensive and cohesive regulatory system to govern stem cell

research and its application undermines the moral value of the human embryo. It may also hinder developments in this field of research in Ireland. The Council recommends the establishment of a State-funded regulatory authority, which would function independently and transparently to oversee embryo research.”

* **Animal-Hybrid Cell Lines:** cells derived from an embryo created by removing the nucleus from an animal egg cells and replacing it with human DNA.

Ends:

Notes to Editor:

- The Irish Council for Bioethics is an independent, national body set up by the Government in 2002 to consider the ethical questions raised by biological research and biomedicine, such as stem cell research, IVF, genetic modification and euthanasia. An important objective of the Council is to promote public understanding, informed discussion and education with respect to bioethical issues. For more information see www.bioethics.ie
- Bioethics is a discipline dealing with the ethical implications of research and practice in the biological sciences and medicine. It facilitates a deeper understanding of a range of moral choices, which can inform decision-making in areas of public policy and with respect to the direction and control of science. Bioethics is also a forward looking discipline, working to anticipate future questions of concern, encourage awareness about them and stimulate progressive debate amongst the public.