

Media Release

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Should Stem Cell Research be Permitted in Ireland?

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, heart attacks or spinal cord injury.

Although stem cell research is on the cutting edge of biological science, the field is still in its infancy. Nonetheless, the pace at which developments are occurring is astonishing and many predict that adult and embryonic stem cell therapies might only be a decade away. It is, therefore, essential that the legal and ethical issues associated with this research be addressed. For this reason the Irish Council for Bioethics (ICB) is now seeking the views of the Irish public on this controversial topic through a public consultation, in the form of a questionnaire, which will commence on 5th March 2007 with a view to publishing a report in early 2008.

Some of the questions posed will include, whether Ireland should permit the undertaking of embryonic stem cell research (adult stem cell research is currently conducted at a number of locations in Ireland); at what point people believe an embryo acquires full moral status; and whether there is a need for specific legislation concerning stem cell research in Ireland.

The ICB will also ask respondents whether they think it would be acceptable to use embryos produced but not used during *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF) treatment for stem cell research. For many reasons, including the completion of a family or separation from a partner, the embryos made for IVF may not all be used by the couple undergoing treatment. While proponents believe it is morally responsible to use embryos, which will perish anyway, for research to help seriously ill people, opponents believe destroying these embryos to procure stem cells is akin to conducting research on terminally ill patients and should therefore be banned.

Embryonic stem cell researchers predict that their work will produce valuable therapies for debilitating and incurable diseases in years to come. Even if Ireland chooses not to allow this kind of research, citizens may still be faced with a moral dilemma in the future. While therapies derived from embryonic stem cell research may not be available in this country they may well be available abroad and Irish people might have to decide whether or not to travel in order to avail of them.

Dr Siobhán O'Sullivan, Scientific Director of the Irish Council for Bioethics said, "Creating sound public policy on such a scientifically complex and ethically fraught area not only requires people to be adequately informed but also to be allowed to express their opinions on this emotionally charged topic".

Questionnaires are available from the Irish Council for Bioethics, Regus House, Block 4, Harcourt Centre, Harcourt Road, Dublin 2, and must be returned by 30th April 2007. Submissions can also be made via the Bioethics website, www.bioethics.ie

Ends:

Notes to Editor:

- Stem Cells can be divided into two categories: adult stem cells (ASCs) *i.e.* cells taken from umbilical cord blood, children's milk teeth and adult tissue such as bone marrow, heart, brain and skin and embryonic stem cells (ESCs) *i.e.* cells derived from the inner cell mass of the early embryo, 4-5 days after fertilisation. While ASCs raise questions regarding informed consent, it is ESC research, which has caused most contention and debate.

- 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.