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News

New guidelines for stem cell research

by Alexander Epstein
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SYDNEY: Guidelines designed to reduce controversy over embryonic stem cell research have been proposed by a U.S.-based group of researchers.

Organisations that commit to the voluntary guidelines will agree not to engage in experiments that lack a compelling scientific rationale, raise strong shared ethical concerns or use embryos from in vitro cultures older than 14 days. Additionally, subscribers would not conduct experiments that attempt to interbreed humans and animals.

The guidelines also state that researchers must make their research materials readily accessible to the biomedical community.

According to lead author George Daley, of Children's Hospital Boston in Massachusetts, "This is a clear statement by the leading organisation representing stem cell organisations worldwide that stem cell scientists are interested in performing stem cell research under the most scrupulous ethical guidelines with sound oversight, subject to ... careful regulations and ongoing review and approval."

The guidelines, a summary of which was published today in the U.S. journal *Science*, are the product of the International Society for Stem Cell Research (ISSCR). The ISSCR is an independent nonprofit organisation aimed at fostering the exchange of information, encouraging research and promoting professional and public education in all areas of stem cell research.

According to Daley, "Our guidelines are founded on the principle that it is a very highly-worthy area of research to be studying human embryonic stem cells. Up until now [scientists] have been operating under a patchwork quilt of regulation ... there was no clean consistent set of principles; these guidelines now articulate those principles."

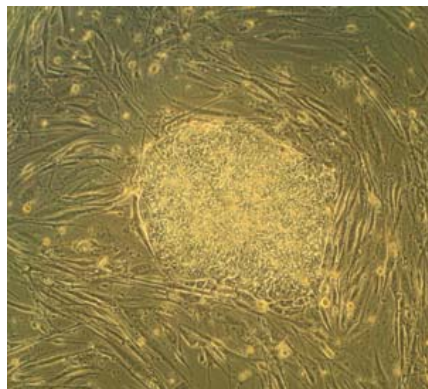
Embryonic stem cell (ESC) research will always remain controversial, added Daley. "The point is; these are guidelines that say it's not up to the individual scientists. This type of research engages enough questions that it is imperative that it is subject to a special level of scrutiny - scrutiny by other scientists, disinterested impartial community observers, ethicists. There has to be some community consensus that the work is important enough to go forwards."

According to co-author Alan Trounson, of Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, the guidelines proposed by the ISSCR are adaptable and not legally binding. They are aimed at giving structure to ESC research, but leaving the final say to each institution's oversight and ethics committee. Daley suggested that, because the guidelines are so broad and comprehensive, any institution that refused to adhere to them should justify their reluctance.

Some groups have voiced concerns over the incentives some institutions might offer women to donate eggs for ESC research; they believe that if a monetary reward is given for the donation of eggs it would bias woman to donate despite the risks involved. The ISSCR decided to leave decisions on reimbursement to the legal and ethical committees of individual institutions.

Trounson explained, "The way in which we approach donors is on the basis of agreement. We have developed comprehensive consent forms and the local ethics and oversight committee will also be involved in the decision making."

The guidelines may provide a solid foundation for scientists researching in countries that are yet to develop laws relating to ESC research, said Daley. "Where those laws have not been written, we hope these guidelines are going to provide transparency for how the research is done: a uniform set of guiding principals that all institutions and scientists can follow ... so scientists and institutions don't need to re-invent the wheel but have a set of guidelines they can adhere too."



Research on human embryonic stem cells raises ethical concerns for some people. A new set of guidelines proposed by a group of concerned scientists may help reduce the controversy.

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