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German Ethics Council Narrowly Recommends Removing Ban on Embryonic Stem Cell Research

By Peter J. Smith

BERLIN, July 18, 2007 (LifeSiteNews.com) - The National Ethics Council, the body charged with advising the German government on medical ethics, narrowly recommended that the law banning embryonic stem-cell research be gutted of its most important protections on Monday. The recommendation sets the stage for the Parliament to consider revising the law later this autumn.

In a narrow 14 - 10 vote, the NEC voted in favour of abolishing the law's cut-off date that prohibits German scientists from working on any stem-cell lines derived from human embryos killed after January 1, 2002. The 2002 law was passed in an effort to discourage foreign laboratories from making and marketing embryonic stem-cell lines to German scientists.

The NEC proposal would abolish the cut-off date and set up an authority to test each case individually. According to the minority this would effectively "hollow out the stem cell law" depriving the law of any real force.

Horst Dreier, speaking for the NEC majority, argued for liberalizing the stem-cell laws, saying, "If the current rules remain, German science will be hopelessly sidelined". The majority said that a change in the law should guarantee that manufacturers do not make a profit and should end penalties for scientists involved in international projects using embryonic stem cells.

However, the minority report protested against the majority's proposal, pointing out that no cures have resulted from embryonic stem cell research and therapies based on it are unlikely to be developed in the foreseeable future.

The Catholic Church in Germany also voiced its protest against the NEC proposal: "The demands of even important research interests cannot under any circumstances lead to human embryos being created," stated the German Catholic Bishop's Conference. "We must not subordinate the protection of life to the freedom of research."

The Catholic Church has condemned embryonic stem-cell research for destroying the human life of an embryo, and has charged it as unnecessary since ethical sources - such as adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood - have provided a growing list of real cures and therapies, while embryonic stem cell research has not.

German politicians have indicated they will introduce legislation relaxing restrictions into the Bundestag, Germany's lower house of parliament, this autumn. The German Parliament is expected to be divided on the issue, as it was in the 2002 debate over the existing ban.

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