

Response of the Catholic Health Association of Canada
to the
Discussion Paper published by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research
*Human Stem Cell Research: Opportunities for Health and Ethical
Perspectives*

Introduction

The Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC) is the national voice for Catholic health care. The organization is committed to advancing a vision of health and healing that encompasses the emotional, spiritual, social and physical well-being of people. Its members include seven provincial associations, 127 hospitals and homes, sponsor organizations, health care professionals and individuals.

Since ethics is one of the four focus areas in the work of the CHAC, the Association has a keen interest in ethical issues related to genetics and biotechnology, and stem cell research in particular. We appreciate the work that has been done by the CIHR in producing its discussion paper, *Human Stem Cell Research*, and in providing the opportunity for organizations and individuals to submit responses to the document.

During the CHAC Annual Convention, held in St. John's, April 28 to May 1, 2001, a number of resolutions were endorsed by the membership, including one concerning stem cell research (Attachment 1). One component of the resolution called on the CHAC to submit a response to the CIHR discussion paper.

Our response is comprised of three parts:

- Part 1— Recommendations the CHAC supports
- Part 2 — Questions and concerns
- Part 3 — Recommendations and conclusion

Part 1 —
Recommendations
we support

By way of introduction, the CHAC commends the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) for its effort to proactively address emerging health research issues and to foster a discussion of ethical principles and guidelines for stem cell research.

As a national christian health organization we are part of a tradition that encourages the use of wisdom and compassion in the pursuit of new methods for bringing healing to those in need. The Association shares the hope of many that stem cell research will bring about the possibility of new treatments for serious illnesses resulting from the death or deterioration of cells and tissues required for good health.

The CHAC appreciates that, while CIHR does recognize the great potential stem cell research holds for such serious conditions as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, and spinal cord injuries, the discussion paper acknowledges the ethical issues raised by research in this field.

A moratorium on the creation of embryos by somatic cell nuclear transfer for the purpose of deriving stem cell lines

We support the recommendation that embryos should not be created by somatic cell nuclear transfer into human oocytes for the purpose of deriving stem cell lines. As the basis for a moratorium, the CIHR document notes that enormous technical and safety issues are inherent in the application of this procedure, and that the normal development of embryos and cell lines derived in this manner is far from certain.

While we share these concerns for safety, our support for the recommendation is based primarily on our view of the moral status of the human embryo. On this issue the CIHR document acknowledges that "ethical, social and legal uncertainties remain". (*Human Stem Cell Research*, pg. 18)

Catholic teaching holds that a human being exists from conception — that is to say from the moment the zygote has formed. No human being, including the embryo, should be used as a means to an end. Moreover, it is always wrong to destroy another human being even if the goal is to help another.

We have noted with interest that in submissions to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health on the draft legislation — *The Assisted Human Reproduction Act* — the issue of stem cell research has been raised by many of the witnesses.

For example, a number of ethicists (May 31, 2001) and witnesses from various faith communities (June 7, 2001) presented scientific and professional opinion that supports the view that a human being exists from conception. We suggest that CIHR review the transcripts of these proceedings as part of its work.

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That the creation of human embryos by *in vitro* fertilization for the purpose of deriving stem cell lines not be supported.

Given our position on the moral status of the embryo, we strongly support the recommendation that the creation of human embryos by *in vitro* fertilization for the purpose of deriving stem cell lines should not be supported.

That CIHR should place a moratorium on procedures aimed at creating “genetically mosaic embryos”

The CHAC strongly endorses the recommendation that CIHR place a moratorium on its funding of the following procedures:

- i) research in which human pluripotent cells are combined with an animal embryo
- ii) research in which animal pluripotent stem cells are combined with a human embryo.

That CIHR review the field of stem cell research on an ongoing basis... to broaden or narrow the scope of permitted research as appropriate

We support the CIHR position which acknowledges that future discoveries could give rise to the need or possibility to “broaden or narrow the scope of permitted research.” As a result of the impressive results in current research with adult stem cells which show that the adult body harbours stem cells that are as flexible as embryonic stem cells, we suggest that CIHR narrow the scope of permitted research to adult stem cells on the basis that such research would not involve the destruction of human embryos.

Part 2 —

Questions and concerns

**The human embryo —
“a special moral status”**

The discussion paper adopts the position that the embryo has a “special moral status” because of its potential to grow into a human being. It is this special moral status that forms the basis for the recommendation to prohibit the creation of human embryos for research purposes or by cloning.

Such a designation of special moral status, however, has no real force. The discussion paper recommends that embryos created by other means may be stripped of their cells and destroyed. In other words, the embryo’s moral status need not prevent researchers from killing it. On this issue we suggest that further consideration should be given to setting out in law restrictions that would reflect respectful treatment of the embryo. Furthermore, the issue of whether some proponents of stem cell research distort its moral and practical value in order to justify the use of embryos should be given much more consideration.

**Human embryos that
remain after infertility
treatments**

The CIHR recommendation to fund research to derive embryonic stem cells from human embryos that remain from fertility treatments poses serious difficulties. The discussion paper states clearly that embryos should not be created for research purposes. However, as worded, this recommendation may be inadvertently promoting the creation of what are sometimes referred to as “spare” or “surplus” embryos for research purposes.

**Funding research that
“utilizes human fetal
material resulting from
elective abortions.”**

The CHAC position is that all embryos and fetuses, including those that are malformed, deserve the same respect owed to any human being. As a result, the use of organs and tissues from deliberately aborted fetuses is considered ethically objectionable.

Ethical guidelines

One of the goals set out in the foreword of the discussion paper is that of fostering discussion of ethical principles that will lead to the development of guidelines for health researchers.

In working toward this goal, CIHR recommends the establishment of a national oversight body that would provide a national ethical perspective. The ethical issues outlined in the paper include: the source of the embryos used for research purposes; issues of informed choice; privacy and confidentiality; and commercialization. Such issues, while important, are secondary to the primary ethical issue concerning the moral status of the embryo. We believe more consideration should be given to the moral incompatibility between respecting an embryo and destroying it.

Part 3 — Recommendations and conclusion

In concluding, the CHAC wishes to comment on the foundational arguments used by CIHR in developing its recommendations regarding stem cell research. Those arguments are:

1. “If human embryonic stem cell research is to proceed, it should only do so in a responsible, ethical and accountable fashion.” (pg. 6). On this the CHAC agrees.
2. When it comes to issues involving embryos and fetuses, “ethical, social and legal uncertainties remain. (pg. 18) On this, too, the CHAC agrees.
3. The scientific and health care potential of embryonic stem cell research justifies the destruction of embryos in utilizing them as a source of stem cells. It is here that the CHAC disagrees.

The Association suggests that the report of the British Chief Medical Officer concerning the potential of developments in stem cell research be given more consideration by CIHR. An expert group was commissioned by the British Government to undertake an assessment of new areas of research involving human embryos. It’s report, titled *Stem Cell Research: Medical Progress with Responsibility*, was submitted to Government in June 2000.

The British report acknowledges that the use of any embryo for research purposes raises morally contentious issues. Nonetheless, the expert panel "... concluded that there was not, currently, an alternative to research to derive embryonic stem cells which would offer equivalent benefit in the potential to develop tissue for therapeutic uses."¹

The report also suggests that one of the goals of current research should be to eliminate the need to create embryos as a source of stem cells. "Perhaps though the major potential benefit of research to understand how to reprogramme adult cells is that it should eventually obviate the need to create embryos as a source of stem cells."²

The CHAC suggests that major developments in adult stem cell research have occurred since the British report was written. An article in the *Ottawa Citizen* (May 14, 2001) — under the headline "Researchers find ultimate stem cell" — reported on research that "... provides the strongest evidence to date that the adult body harbours stem cells that are as flexible as embryonic stem cells."

When asked if these findings supported the arguments of those who oppose embryonic stem cell research, the scientists involved disagreed, saying: "If we discontinue embryonic and fetal tissue research, we'll slow the field down."

The CHAC believes the scientific imperative that says research must proceed as quickly as possible and the ends justifies the means must be challenged. Given the ethical issues involved in using embryos for stem cell research, and the increasing possibility that adult stem cell research represents a viable alternative to embryonic stem cell research, the CHAC recommends that CIHR concentrate on funding research involving adult stem cells.

Conclusion

The CHAC appreciates the opportunity to participate in this process toward the development of funding guidelines for human stem cell research. The Association wishes CIHR's Working Group on Stem Cells well as it continues its work, and we look forward to its final report.

June 11, 2001

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1. *Stem Cell Research: Medical Progress with Responsibility: A report from the Chief Medical Officer's Expert Group reviewing the potential of developments in stem cell research and cell nuclear replacement to benefit human health*, Department of Health (Great Britain), June 2000, pg. 42.
 2. *Stem Cell Research: Medical Progress with Responsibility*, pg. 40.