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NEWS RELEASE

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CHAC Opposes the Destruction of Human Embryos for Stem Cell Research

Response to CIHR Guidelines for Stem Cell Research

Ottawa - The Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC) is opposed to the guidelines announced by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) that would allow research on stem cells derived from human embryos.

“We believe the embryo deserves the same respect owed to any human being,” said Dr. Leo Klug, CHAC Chairperson.

The CIHR guidelines, which apply only to government-funded research, state that research using embryos that remain from fertility treatments will be eligible for funding. In presenting the guidelines a CIHR spokesperson indicated that the agency has chosen not to address questions about the moral status of the embryo per se.

“We do not accept the assertion that early embryos are not human life, and we challenge the conclusion that it is acceptable to destroy them in order to extract their stem cells,” said Dr. Klug. The CHAC emphasizes that its position does not reflect an anti-science stance. “As a national Christian health organization, we share 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.”

The moral dilemma lies in determining what sources of stem cells will be used. Other sources of stem cells exist. For example, impressive results in current research with adult stem cells (from adult bone, blood and skin cells) show that the adult body harbours stem cells that may be as flexible as embryonic stem cells. The CHAC position is that the ethical dimensions of this research are as important as the scientific, and the scope of permitted research should be narrowed to those sources of stem cells that are not problematic.

The CHAC is also concerned about CIHR’s release of these guidelines prior to the introduction of legislation on these matters. Health Minister Anne McLellan has indicated that it is her intention to introduce legislation on assisted human reproduction in the spring. That legislation is to address both stem cell research and the use of embryos for research. “The CIHR regulations must not preempt the legislation or the debate in Parliament about these matters,” said Dr. Klug.

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