



Workshop:

Ethical aspects of stem cell repositories and stem cell databases
Brussels, 17 February 2005

WHAT IS NEXT? AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STEM CELL RESEARCH: John Harris

Regarding the ethical framework of stem cell research – what is the value of ethical protocols?

There is a great hope that many hundreds of thousands of patients will be helped by stem cell based therapies. There is a powerful moral obligation to participate in scientific research and to support it. At the same time, there is also the principle of non-maleficence that should be respected: if you can do something to alleviate suffering, you must do it. There is also the principle of fairness or justice - everybody living in the West certainly has benefited from the products of past research, so we should advance research to allow the future generations to benefit from our research work.

We have to face the problem of the depth of disagreement of about embryonic stem cell research. When we discuss embryo research the question of the scope of human rights comes up. What is the range of individuals able to make moral claims? Are embryos and foetuses included under the term of individuals or human persons? Those who think that an embryo is one of us will include the embryo in the scope of an “individual” and will protect it. But those that think like the legislators in the UK will have a different view. There is a great disagreement about the scope of embryo protection.

Another important and difficult issue is the principle of equity in stem cell research. All humans are born equal, entitled to freedom from discrimination. The principle of wide availability suggests that it is important to encourage the wide availability of publicly funded research results: the free access to papers, copy distribution, publication.

Yet another important issue is the protection of individual researchers. This issue is not addressed too much in ethical documents. Research is illegal and criminalized in some countries, and permitted in others. There is a real danger of researchers being criminalized in their own country for doing what is allowed in another country. We should try to give researchers some degree of protection, and to promote an important European ideal of free movement not just of individuals, but also of science. The solution to this problem cannot ethically be the responsibility of the researchers alone. The European

research must be funded in a way that does not discriminate between different states, and the policy of the EU should be consistent with these principles. The research aims should be pursued in a regulated and controlled environment. The motivation of most researchers to do research is to help people who suffer, not just to promote their own career and to receive a Nobel prize.

The pre-implantation embryos, no matter what is their status, should be given respect and they should not be used for trivial purposes - for purely basic biology research or cosmetic products research. Animal embryos can be used for that instead. But human embryos could be used for clinical research. If we protect the dignity of human embryo, we should also prohibit the morning-after pill, not just research on embryos. Allowing the morning-after pill does not seem to imply treating an embryo with respect. But it does not imply treating embryos with disrespect either. The moral issues concerning abortion, contraception and embryo research must be considered. There is a great inconsistency in different regulations even within the states. For example, you can have an abortion in Germany, but you are not allowed to conduct embryo research. Knowing that oral contraceptives kill early embryos we are deeply inconsistent if we allow oral contraception and abortions and do not allow embryo research. We do not act as if we believe in what we are saying. There is insincerity in our arguments. As a result of such ban on embryo research, researchers are forced to either abandon their area of research or move to another country where research is allowed. But if a treatment for an important disease becomes available from doing embryonic stem cell research – what will those countries, opposing embryo research do?