

Stem cell controversy continues as Ottawa tables bill

On the heels of recent guidelines from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR, see *CMAJ* 2002;166[8]:1077), Health Canada has issued its own rules for stem cell research that will permit the study of both embryonic and adult stem cells.

The Act Respecting Assisted Human Reproduction, introduced May 9, bans human cloning and the buying or selling of human sperm, eggs or embryos, or providing goods and services in exchange for them. The proposed law also

prohibits paying women to act as surrogate mothers.

Scientists embraced the contents of the legislation, saying it will permit the best research because both adult and embryonic stem cells will be available for use in the laboratory. As with the CIHR guidelines, the legislation will not permit the creation of embryos for stem cell research, but it will allow surplus embryos produced during in-vitro fertilization to be used for medical research. The legislation also creates a body, the

Assisted Human Reproduction Agency of Canada, to monitor and enforce the regulations and to set the parameters for stem cell research.

"We are quite pleased that the legislation resembles what was in the CIHR guidelines," says Dr. Barbara Beckett, manager of scientific affairs and training at the Stem Cell Network, an organization representing university-based researchers from across the country. "Researchers don't want to close the door on embryonic stem cells. The hope is that both adult and embryonic stem cells can be manipulated to highlight the best properties of both cell types and ultimately obtain the best therapy possible."

While embryonic stem cells can form cells for every tissue in the body, it's unclear if adult stem cells can do the same, explained Beckett, who holds a PhD in biochemistry.

Federal Health Minister Anne McLellan said she is taking a middle-of-the-road path, but critics say the legislation supports experimentation for experimentation's sake. "They should concentrate on adult stem cell research, which seems to have far greater potential," says Karen Murawsky, director of public affairs for the Campaign Life Coalition. "While there are claims that embryonic stem cells cure diseases, there is no proof that they have worked."

Murawsky added that the new legislation mirrors the CIHR recommendations rather than reflecting the views of MPs, and said a free vote in the Commons should be held. McLellan expects the bill to pass before the current session of Parliament ends.

In the US, President George Bush wants the Senate to pass a law banning all human cloning, including the cloning of embryos for research and treatment of diseases. In 2000, the US agreed to permit federally financed research on stem cell lines derived from embryos discarded by fertility clinics.

The UK has approved research involving embryonic stem cells. Last fall, the House of Lords passed a bill banning reproductive human cloning. However, the government says it is committed to therapeutic cell cloning to cure illness. — *Louise Gagnon, Ottawa*

Post-traumatic stress an occupational hazard for journalists?

For years, firefighters, police, ambulance attendants and other emergency and military personnel have been offered ways to cope with the carnage and mayhem they witness. However, journalists who often witness the same atrocities, haven't received any help. Now that's changing with Newscoverage Unlimited (www.newscoverage.org/), an educational, non-profit organization founded in 2000 by Montreal journalist Robert Frank. It trains journalists to help each other with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression or drug dependency. (The US National Center for PTSD offers a research-based Web site on all aspects of the disorder, www.ncptsd.org/about/history/index.html.)

Newscoverage has run two 3-day sessions that have trained 17 news personnel how to help potentially traumatized coworkers. Frank became convinced the organization was needed following the September 1998 Swissair crash off Nova Scotia that killed 229 people. As coverage continued, journalists gathered informally to discuss what they'd seen. Frank says the experience taught him that reporters "can be affected by a story."

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, there has been more recognition of this stress. "Dan Rather [of CBS News] was crying that day," Frank said during a

recent Canadian Association of Journalists meeting. "It changed everything for journalists." Bob McKeown, an NBC correspondent, said the Sept. 11 attacks "turned up the emotional thermostat for a lot of us." (The physical danger is also increasing, with 37 journalists dying on the job in 2001, including *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, who was murdered as he pursued a story.)

Frank warns that journalists face obstacles in combating on-the-job trauma. Journalism is an intensely competitive profession, he says, and reporters are "significantly reluctant to acknowledge any vulnerability. Saying you were traumatized covering a car accident could land you a choice assignment in the Food section." — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



Suspects in the abduction and murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl are arrested in Pakistan.

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