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Stem Cell Research in China: An Intertwinement of International Finances, Ambition, and Bioethics

By Margaret Sleeboom

A present, stem cells from embryos (or ‘totipotent’ stem cells) appear to have the greatest potential to be developed into the widest range of tissues. These embryonic stem cells have the potential to be used for both basic research and for therapeutic applications, including the treatment of a wide range of currently incurable disorders.

In China the situation is not very different. But what arguments are used for and against it in Chinese debates on embryonic stem cell research (ESR)? At the Conference on Stem Cell Research in May 2002, a German scholar of Asian Studies, Ole Doerling (Hamburg University), caused consternation when he spoke about the bioethical and legal dimensions of stem cell research in Germany. He had probably aimed to sensitize his mostly Chinese audience to bioethical considerations in their research, especially when suspecting imperialist conditions of research.

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Stem cell research promises remedies to widespread diseases ranging from diabetes to paralysis. ‘Stem cell’ is a term used to refer to a range of cells that have the ability to divide into specialized body cells, such as blood cells or new tissue. By studying the processes in which stem cells grow and differentiate, biologists study the cause of many diseases, and hope to use them for therapeutic uses in the repair of damaged tissue and organs for a wide range of currently incurable disorders.

According to China Daily, 28 February 2001 stem cell research has become a hot item among scientists in China. Li Zengjiong, director of the Stem Cell Research Centre established in January 2001, is one of a handful of Chinese pioneers of ESR. Shortly after a US breakthrough, a Chinese team led by Xu Ling claimed in a paper published in the Zhongguan Medical School Journal that they too had succeeded in isolating and growing human embryonic stem cells. A few medical institutes across the country also initiated research in this field, either independently or in collaboration with foreign colleagues. In October 2000, Li’s centre established a library of human adult stem cells with which to research the developing processes both from embryonic to adult stem cells and from adult stem cells to specialized cells. He hopes to attract big money, but fears that the priority of companies will be that of making profits and not scientific progress.

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