

NEWSLETTER: Issue 5

Dec 2004

The NSW STEM CELL NETWORK

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NHMRC Licences so far....

Within the Stem Cell Community it is well known that creating new human embryonic stem cells lines is illegal, without a license from the National Health & Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC). To date, three scientific groups in Australia have an NHMRC license to create new hESC lines from excess IVF embryos available prior to April 5, 2002. Two groups are in NSW, and one is in Victoria .

In Australia , each research group must follow the same strict guidelines to create and characterise a hESC line before it can be used for research purposes. There are no guidelines however, for the distribution of new hESC lines to researchers in Australia and internationally. Each group has its own agenda, driven by a combination of scientific advancement and profit.

First off the block to receive an NHMRC license was Sydney IVF, a private company that plans to build a profitable business out of distributing new hESC lines. The group reports that the first hESC line has been created but not yet fully characterised. Stem Cell Sciences, the Melbourne-based private company working with Melbourne IVF and the Australian Stem Cell Centre to create hESC lines, stated last month that their first line, Mel-1, would be freely available to all researchers world-wide without obvious commercial restraints. The company's motive is to attract international collaborative work on their hESC lines.

Last month, the third group, IVF Australia in agreement with the Diabetes Transplant Unit, was the first public institution in Australia to be licensed to create hESC lines that will most likely be made available through the NSW Stem Cell Network.

For now, all researchers in Australia are using hESC lines created in Singapore for research purposes and it is predicted that in early 2005, Aussie-made hESC lines will be available to researchers world-wide. Whether these Aussie hESC cell lines will come with commercial restraints or not will depend on which group gets there first.

The NSW Stem Cell Network is running courses to teach scientists how to grow hESC lines. The first course is on offer very soon, 28th-30th Jan 2005, and will cost \$1,500/person.

Parliament Revisits Stem Cell Legislation

Over the next year, a national committee will review the Stem Cell Acts of 2002, covering the use of spare IVF embryos and the moratorium on therapeutic cloning, or "nuclear transfer".

The review will begin Dec 19th 2004 with the Health Minister, Tony Abbott likely to lead the national review committee which has to report within a year to federal parliament and COAG on issues such as community perception and therapeutic potential of stem cells.

The NSW Ministry for Science and Medical Research' policy branch will be providing a response and updated information on the issues arising from the stem cell review.

The NSW Stem Cell Network will have a session on the "Stem Cell Review" at the 6th Stem Cell Workshop, 6th April 2005.

Doing a Backflip on Stem Cell Policy !

The Australian government's position on stem cells research has been clouded after it supported the Costa Rica-USA led proposal to the United Nations to ban all forms of human cloning including therapeutic cloning.

Supporting the Costa Rica proposal is contrary to the Australian stem cell legislation passed in late 2002, banning human cloning and putting a three-year moratorium on therapeutic cloning, that is cloning an embryo to create stem cells for research

At the opening of the Australian Stem Cell Centre's 2nd National Scientific conference in Sydney last month, Democrat Senator Natasha Stott Despoja highlighted the issue.

" Australia has done a back flip: after initially opposing the Costa Rican motion which proposed a ban on all forms of cloning, we co-sponsored it" Stott Despoja told up to 300 delegates at the conference. She emphasized that this is pre-empting our own review process and, thus, potentially changing our legislative framework.

Warning the stem cell community not to be complacent, the Senator told them to be well prepared for another round of debates as the stem cell review draws closer.

The NSW Stem Cell Network is planning to organise a Hypothetical Stem Cell Debate during National Science Week, August 2005.

Research Opportunities

The Australian Stem Cell Centre (ASCC) is offering Scholarships to premier graduate students with an interest in conducting scientific research that aligns with the priorities of the ASCC. Scholarships are for new or continuing post-graduate students. Download application forms at www.nscs.edu.au/scholarship.html Application close 21.12.04.

For further information contact: Graham Jenkin:
graham.jenkin@med.monash.edu.au

Learn How to Grow Human Embryonic Stem Cells

Do you want to know how to grow human embryonic stem (hESC)? The NSW Stem Cell Network is organising a 3 day course to teach qualified scientists the skills required to grow hESC. This hands-on course is available for groups of 3 people. Tissue culture experience is a prerequisite. The cost will be \$1,500 / person.

Date: 28th-30th Jan 2005

Venue: Prince of Wales Hospital , Randwick , NSW

Contact: The NSW Stem Cell Network ASAP Tel: 9382 4856

Events for the Diary

25th - 27th February 2005

Stem Cell Course: "Learn How to grow Human Embryonic Stem Cells".

Prince of Wales Hospital, Randwick NSW

Wed 6th April 2005:

6th Stem Cell Workshop – "Moving ahead with Tissue Engineering".

Australian Technology Park , Redfern (TBC).

This is a special event to be promoted by the NSW Department of State and Regional Development during "**NSW first for Biotechnology**" week.

August 2005:

Hypothetical: "Stem Cells mean Business",

Scientia Building , University of NSW.

This is a special event is to be held during National Science Week (TBC