CHURCH of IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD
CHURCH in SOCIETY COMMITTEE
Medical Ethics, Science and Technology Sub-Committee

Submission to the Irish Council for Bioethics – November 2006

Stem Cell Research

The Church in Society Committee of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland seeks to identify, contribute to, challenge and develop areas of living today where the mission of the Church can be active and the love of God shared. It does so by seeking an informed understanding of the societies in which we live and aims as much to listen as to speak and to be informative and practical in the fruit of its work. The sub-groups of the Church in Society Committee are authorized to issue statements and reports in their own names. The following submission has been produced by the Medical Ethics, Science and Technology Sub-Committee and, as such, may not represent the views of the Church of Ireland as a whole.

This Sub-Committee welcomes the opportunity to discuss the ethical and moral issues surrounding the issue of stem cell research and thanks the Council for the invitation to contribute to the debate.

Introduction

So often in the excitement of a new procedure, drug or therapy the ethical issues are not considered thoroughly and calmly, and in as much depth as can be determined at the time and prior to the introduction, but rather compassion and care seem to overwhelm any reasoned debate. Often, this debate only happens after the event and when issues become problems, most of which were predictable at the time. This is true of the issues now surrounding *in vitro* fertilisation, the embryos that are the product of this technique, and especially the status of the supernumerary embryos.

For Christians we believe that we have the potentiality to be human beings from our beginning. We are made in the image of God and, as such, each embryo requires and deserves a deep sense of reverence and respect for its human life in its potentiality. However a distinction is made between an adult human being and the embryo, between being and potential, when punishment for the death of the embryo and injury or death of the mother (Ex 21:22-25) is determined.

Humanity is fallen. Some people can have difficulty in conception, and God uses the medical and scientific professions as a means of healing. This is the restorative role given not, as Dryden has said, "God never made his work for man to mend". We believe that full use should be made of advances within the context of a Christian ethic, fully informed by Scripture and by prayer. With the increasing complexities of the ethical problems arising there cannot be a simplistic response but, with a

theologically informed mind, people may determine whatever solutions are right to meet those human needs. We accept that there may not always be unanimity in the answer. Even if there is an initial agreed solution there are often unexpected side issues of effect that will require further consideration and may require the development of original decisions.

1. What do you think the status of an embryo is?

We believe that the embryo is a potential human being.

2. When should rights (full or partial) be assigned to the embryo?

From the moment of fertilisation, we believe that the embryo has rights equal to those of the unborn as laid out in Article 40.3.3 in the Constitution:

> "The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right."

3. Should supernumerary embryos (embryos that are not to be implanted) be used for research?
Ideally, we would suggest that supernumerary embryos should not be created as part of the *in-vitro* fertilisation process. It is hoped that one day, the technique will be developed enough to allow only those embryos that are going to be implanted to be created. We also believe that it should be made much clearer to couples undergoing IVF that it is their choice and right not to have excess embryos made and stored.

However, we do recognise that it has been considered necessary to produce a number of embryos in excess of those likely to be implanted at one time in order to increase the likelihood of success and to prevent the excess of pharmacological and surgical interference to the woman. It has therefore been regarded as inevitable that there would be excess embryos. We feel very uncomfortable with the destruction of these embryos. We are also not comfortable with the use of these embryos for research as the use of cells from them is not to the embryo's benefit. However, it is perhaps the lesser of two evils. The Committee intends to keep this area under review, as medical research will undoubtedly produce more knowledge and we believe that our current position may have to be reviewed in the future. The Committee further believes that research into the use of adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood cells should be given much higher priority.

4. Is it acceptable to create embryos specifically for research?

No. We believe that it is unacceptable to create life with the intention of destroying it. This would be contrary to the sanctity of life of the embryo.

5. Is it acceptable to import embryonic stem cell lines into Ireland?

This would only be acceptable on the grounds that the stem cells were not specifically created for research and are in keeping with our feelings above. We should not benefit from something which we are not prepared to do ourselves.

We would also be very concerned that any such importation could lead to the production of embryos on a commercial basis and careful regulation would be required.

6. Is it acceptable to use therapies that may be derived from embryonic stem cell research?

Yes, provided that this research has been carried out ethically and only on supernumerary embryos as already stipulated.

7. Is there a need for specific legislation with respect to embryo research in Ireland?

Yes. Legislation would be required in order to ensure that such research is maintained along strict, ethical guidelines. There is currently legislation in the UK and in the wider EU to uphold standards in this area.

8. What role should the Irish public have in formulating policy in stem cell research?

In the interests of transparency, we think that it is important for the public to be consulted regarding issues that affect them. However, in the case of the formulation of a policy on stem cell research, it would be essential that any such consultation process would be in the context of an educational programme to ensure a fully participatory and informed debate.

9. Should Ireland invest in stem cell biobanks? If yes, should these biobanks store all or only some of the following: embryonic stem cells, adult stem cells, umbilical cord blood stem cells?

With regard to adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood cells we think that investment in biobanks would be acceptable. Indeed, we believe that further research into the benefits and possible uses of adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood cells should be given a high priority.

With regard to embryonic stem cells, we would be agreeable to the creation of biobanks, *only if* the embryos used would otherwise have been destroyed and they were not created specifically for such research. The use and sourcing of any funding required to develop and maintain such banks on a national level would have to be carefully considered.

10. Should patents be granted for human stem cells or products derived from them?

No. We firmly believe that there should be no financial gain with regard to research carried out on human stem cells. We see the commodifying of medicine, as has been taking place, with great anxiety. It seems as if the value of life of a human being comes second to profit, and do not see a role for patenting. We would not wish to see "Research Ratings" and the draw of research scientists being made on the profits of this work and with this origin.

11. Should the formation of human/animal chimeric embryos be permitted?

For the purposes of this paper, we have taken 'human / animal chimera' to refer to an embryo with two distinct cell lines present. We would believe that the formation of such embryos is not necessary at the current time and should therefore not be permitted.