

SUMMARY OF SPEAKERS' TALKS + AUDIENCE QUESTIONS/COMMENTS

Dr Marios Stavridis

Offered a brief and accessible introduction to stem cell (SC) research by addressing what a SC is, the different kinds of stem cell, where they come from and gave some reasons why this whole area of science is so controversial.

Prof Graeme Laurie

Outlined an international overview of how the law currently legislates and regulates in such a sensitive and contentious area as SC research and explained how it is very difficult to make rulings when there is no general consensus on the different areas of concern. Given this lack of consensus how can the law move forward and regulate responsibly and appropriately?

Dr Neville Cobbe

Posed four main questions: 1) what is a stem cell? 2) what is a "human being"? 3) when does "life" begin? 4) what do we think is acceptable? Some of the ethical and moral issues were highlighted and the variety of models available to deal with these issues.

SUMMARY OF AUDIENCE COMMENTS & QUESTIONS

Comment

Why do ordinary members of the public tend to be much more liberal than their leaders? In the West this may be due to pressure groups leaning on governments.

Question to panel

Is current incapacity legislation going to be sufficient and capable of coping with issues of consent and refusal in SC therapy and research, bearing in mind the complexity of the issues they raise?

Comment

An audience member told of his Christian belief, despite having two degenerative illnesses, that he could not accept any future cures that had been derived from research using ESC, because all life is precious (even at the point of conception). He could, however, accept treatment that had been derived from ASC or from umbilical chords because no life had been taken from these.

Question to panel

For many years US medical people would not use the research carried out in German concentration camps. If there were a breakthrough in China would it be moral for the US to take up this breakthrough even though it may have utilised research techniques banned in the West?

Question to panel

An audience member's nephew had been paralysed at the age of 30 and he wanted to know, regardless of morals and ethics, if there was any hope of stem cell research leading to a cure.

Question to panel

What stem cell therapies are currently offered in other countries?

A debate ensued about why there is such a gap between what is happening in the lab and what is happening to the patient.

Comment

An audience member drew a comparison between the £4 million of government money given to set up a new SC research laboratory and the £500 million it costs to bring ONE new drug to the market. He offered this as a “scary perspective” on how much all this research is going to cost.

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS FROM OPEN FLOOR DUNDEE

1. The legislative and decision-making processes of several countries were discussed and compared when examining the comment that ordinary members of the public seem to be a lot more liberal than their leaders.

2. The challenges faced by some people of faith - who believe that all human life is sacred (from the moment of conception) - were debated from both a Christian and secular point of view. Embryonic status, embryonic surplus and alternative SC therapies derived from ASC were discussed, and concepts of self-sacrifice and choice were touched upon in terms of how moral and ethical ESC research is.

3. The regulations around SC research vary from country to country and from continent to continent: bearing this in mind, it was asked whether it would be right for UK or US scientists to take up and use SC research that had been carried out in countries where the law is either less robust and stringent, or where other nations and cultures interpret some of the moral and ethical issues differently.

4. Medical trade journals and the entire concept of the review and regulation of scientific research literature were discussed. At present scientists tend to review each other and there is no external regulatory body overseeing what is published. One way forward would be to create an external and objective mechanism to do this job of reviewing the literature.

5. The effectiveness of SC research in treating spinal chord injuries was discussed. Animal models have shown some success in allowing injured rats, previously unable to move, to regain movement in their hind legs. However, humans are not rats and SC research is very much that – at the research stage. The gap between what is happening in labs, and therapies available to patients was explored with some possible factors responsible for this transitional gap being forwarded by the panel.

6. A comment was made about recent news reports of large sums of government money being invested in SC research in the UK. In particular, a member of the audience had read a news report that £4million has been granted to set up a new lab in the north of England. The economic viability of SC therapies was explored and the reasons why SC research has a lot of set-up costs to produce one-off and bespoke therapies were debated.

7. A member of the audience commented on the fact that the cost of taking a single new drug to market was somewhere in the region of £500 million. When compared to the reported £4 million of government money granted to build a new lab, he asserted that the two figures offered a “scary kind of perspective” on how much SC research and therapies will cost in the future.

8. There was a discussion on the work, processes and aims/objectives of the UK Stem Cell Foundation.

SOUNDBITES FROM THE OPEN-FLOOR DEBATE

Why is it that ordinary people always seem much more liberal than their leaders?

I have two incurable diseases but my philosophy would be that I would not want somebody else to lose a life in order for me to gain life.

Why do you need spare embryos, why make more that you need?

If there was a breakthrough in China should the Americans take up that breakthrough if it used research techniques, which they had outlawed?

We could talk about ethics, we could talk about rights or wrongs, we'll never get any consensus on this, but from a personal point of view is there any hope that spinal injuries might be able to be reversed in the future?

Some of us are, I don't know if "desperate" is the right word, but we are looking for something to happen now, not in 20 years time because we probably won't be here.

When are trials actually going to begin in this country?

There is a gap in this country between what's happening in the labs and what's happening to the patient. Why?