Congres in Rome over stamcellen: reacties in de media

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A number of French dailies reported on the stem cell convention held in Rome from 14 to 16 September, which was organised by the Pontifical Academy for Life, the FIAMC (International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations) and the Jérôme Lejeune Foundation.

Embryonic stem cells, which are sought after for their ability to repair organs (brain, heart, kidneys, etc.), initially appeared the easiest to obtain. However, other stem cells which have the potential to transform into heart, brain or liver cells have been discovered in the blood, umbilical cord and olfactory epithelium. A new alternative has also emerged recently which involves transforming fibroblasts into stem cells. This research on non-embryonic stem cells was what drew 350 participants to gather in the Vatican and review the progress of the different published papers.

Nicolas Forraz, a researcher in Newcastle, works on umbilical cord stem cells. He indicated how pleased he was that such a convention could be held and regretted that usually “our techniques (…) do not receive the same interest even though the therapeutic results obtained are convincing.” In his paper, Prof. McGuckin (Newcastle) stressed that no one had ever proved that embryonic stem cells were totipotent. Prof. McGuckin and his team succeeded in obtaining neural, endothelial and hepatic cell cultures from blood cord cells. He referred to an innovative system, developed with NASA, enabling cord blood stem cells to be cultured in 3 dimensions.

Prof. Stauer (University of Düsseldorf, Germany) revealed some promising results: transformed bone marrow stem cells injected into heart attack victims led to improved cardiac functions.

Prof. David Hess (Georgia Medical College, United States), provided an overview of current neurology trials on strokes, Parkinson’s disease, etc. carried out either with bone marrow stem cells or growth factors to stimulate endogenous stem cells or neurons.

Prof. Yamanaka (University of Kyoto, Japan) identified the factors which generate pluripotent stem cells from fibroblast cultures.

Prof. Claude Huriet (Vice Chairman of the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee and Chairman of the Curie Institute in Paris, France) looked at the stem cell issue from an economic and political angle. According to him, “the stem cells for regenerative medicine market is worth 15 billion dollars”.

Neurologist and Chairman of the Convention, Prof. Gian Luigi Gigli, cautioned against misleading announcements made for financial purposes, such as those by Prof. Hwang and Prof. Lanza. “You must not give people false hope. It is too simplistic to say you are going to treat someone with embryonic stem cells as these raise a number of problems, such as DNA instability or lack of compatibility with the receiver,” he stressed.

For Bishop Elio Sgreccia, Chairman of the Pontifical Academy for Life which organised the Convention, “The scientific results support our ethical position. Much research on adult stem cells has achieved positive results and, in certain cases, particularly for heart trouble and brain diseases, treatments have already been applied.” When questioned over what solution the Catholic Church proposed for currently frozen embryos, Bishop Sgreccia replied, “Freezing is in itself an offence against dignity. No matter what solution is adopted, it will be bad. We must achieve an international ban on freezing embryos for conservation before reflecting on the future of currently frozen embryos. If we do not do this, we would be encouraging the practice of freezing human embryos.” Only then can we think about the future of currently frozen embryos… and not the other way round,

he said.

Upon greeting the participants at Castel Gandolfo, Pope Benedict XVI declared that “research on stem cells should be approved and encouraged when it combines scientific knowledge, state-of-the-art technology and ethics which call for respect for human beings at all stages of their existence.” He condemned research on embryonic stem cells which lead to the destruction of human life and over which there can be “neither compromise nor hesitation”. According to him, a society cannot fight crime effectively if it legalises the violation of life in its infancy. Under such circumstances, he said, although research strives for a therapeutic result, it cannot really serve humanity as it causes the destruction of human lives which have the same right to dignity as all other human beings, including researchers. Benedict XVI reaffirmed “the [Catholic Church]’s constant support throughout the two thousand years of its existence for research into treating diseases and the good of humanity. The only resistance there has been, and which persists, concerns forms of research which provide for the programmed destruction of human beings who already exist even if not already born.”