

# Stem Cell Research



## Egg Cell market

National Council of Women of Belgium asks for *feminist* debate... and you?

**Stem Cell Research is the most important research target for last 10 years because**

1. hope for cure very frequent diseases : Diabetes, Parkinson, Cardiac damage, Cerebral damage, ...
2. essential for medical/biological sciences: better understanding of cancer, genetic diseases, early development, fertility, ...
3. new possibilities for pharmaceutical research : studies of toxicity, new growth factors, ...

**Embryonic Stem Cells** are still the most potent and efficient Stem Cells

Embryonic Stem Cells, Cell Lines, Cloning, Nuclear Transfer, **all need egg cells**

This research causes a great demand of Egg Cells, preferably from young girls

**"Harvesting"** human Egg Cells is invasive and **a risk for women's health**

**Some ethic and sociologic questions not debated on so far**

- Are young women informed on the risks?
- What are the long term effects of hormonal stimulation needed for "harvesting"?
- Why are many fertility clinics started in Poland, Ukraine, Africa ...?
- What is the value of "informed consent"?
- Can scientists or industries take patents and make money on "donated" egg cells?
- Is it correct to offer 750 Euro to young girls for their egg cells?
- ...

# Egg cells do not grow on trees

**Position adopted by the Board of the Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad on 19 September 2006**

*A woman has only a limited number of egg cells. The production of egg cells is very slow and delicate: only one at a time every month. Egg cell donation requires a serious medical and surgical procedure.*

*A man has a great number of sperm cells, a production of more than 200 million a day. Sperm cell donation is a natural process.*

Stem cells have become increasingly important in our lives today. They offer hope to many patients as a source of replacement cells to treat diseases, conditions, and disabilities. They are of major importance to scientific research and to biotechnology industry. The egg cell being the mother of all stem cells, there is a high need of egg cells for stem cell research. This matter concerns women all over the world.

Some women follow a hormonal treatment so as to produce several ripe eggs which are collected for their own use (in-vitro fertilization treatment) or for donation to women having infertility problems. In certain countries women sell their egg cells.

Egg cells cannot be frozen and stored but embryos can be frozen and used later on either for the donor herself or donated to another woman. The embryonic stem cells from any surplus embryos can be used for scientific research. Surplus embryos can also be destroyed.

The problem is that there is no real protest against the 'harvesting' of egg cells whereas for instance for embryos there are a lot of regulations.

Therefore a gender perspective is urgently needed in the debate on egg cells which should also take into account the power relations between the physician/scientist and the patient, between the biotechnology industry and an individual woman.

## :: Recommendations

Stem cell research will be continued but it should proceed in an ethical way when harvesting egg cells. Instead of collecting as many egg cells as possible alternative procedures can be followed:

- to use stem cells from surplus embryos;
- to develop new technologies for storing egg cells and for cell cultures;
- to ban any commercialization of egg cells (between individuals, between individuals and companies, between companies);
- to give full information to women so they can give their informed consent before undergoing the hormonal treatment and surgical procedure. This also applies to umbilical cord stem cell donations.