

BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUES

Share your views about
women donating eggs
for stem cell research:
a public debate



the social science
stem cell initiative



The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority's (HFEA)¹ consultation has been prompted by growing pressure for increased quantity and quality of eggs for use in stem cell research. Scientists involved in stem cell research have outlined their desire for freshly collected eggs obtained specifically for research purposes – rather than eggs 'left over' from IVF, as currently practiced. The principle use of donated eggs is to try to create embryos using the cell nuclear transfer technique (or 'therapeutic cloning').

For more information on stem cell research go to www.talkingstemcells.ed.ac.uk

It is hoped that stem cell research will lead to therapies for many diseases and impairments. These therapies are, however, still a long way off. The field attracts much media coverage, in part because of its promise and in part because the research itself raises various social, political and ethical issues. A team of researchers at the University of Edinburgh are running a project: Public Engagement in Stem Cell Research. This project brings together a wide range of people to discuss their views on this new area of biomedical research, and seeks to develop ways of engaging more people in discussions about the issues and possible solutions.

At present, human embryos used in stem cell research are obtained through IVF clinics from donated unused frozen embryos or those graded as unsuitable for IVF purposes. The HFEA also recently licensed one research group in Newcastle to obtain eggs from IVF patients through an 'egg sharing' arrangement – in return for sharing half of any eggs produced from super ovulation, couples receive a reduction in the cost of treatment. The HFEA is considering two ways to increase the supply of eggs: (i) by extending 'egg sharing' arrangements to other clinics; and (ii) by allowing the use of eggs from women not undergoing IVF (who they are calling 'non-patient donors').

Background to the events

The Public Engagement in Stem Cell Research team think it is important that everyone is given the opportunity to contribute to discussion about egg donation for research. To facilitate this, the Public Engagement in Stem Cell Research team are soliciting your views via two routes:

¹The HFEA is responsible for regulating, licensing and monitoring IVF treatments and embryo research in the UK. This includes the donation of eggs and sperm if they are to be stored or used to create embryos.

(i) An online discussion forum which will take place between 16th October and 3rd November

We are inviting people to participate in this time-limited online discussion. We will post a set of questions and issues for discussion, as informed by the research we have carried out so far with various groups across Scotland. You are then invited to contribute to this discussion, providing you with an opportunity to share your thoughts, post any questions you might have and hear the views of others on the issues raised by donating eggs for stem cell research.

To participate in the online discussion go to www.talkingstemcells.ed.ac.uk

(ii) A public event at Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh on 23rd November.

This public event is to allow for further discussion amongst the audience and the panel. You are also invited to ask the panel of experts for their comments on particular aspects of donating eggs for stem cell research.

The panel are:

Diane Beeson, Sociologist and Women's Health Activist

Daniel Brison, Scientific Director at Regional IVF Unit

Donna Dickenson, Medical Ethicist: Academic and Activist

Harry Griffin, Director of Roslin Institute

Sheena Young, Infertility Network UK Regional Coordinator for Scotland

To come along to this event, please reply using the RSVP enclosed before 11th November to Lisa Wood at Old Surgeons' Hall, High School Yards, Edinburgh, EH1 1LZ or email lwood2@staffmail.ed.ac.uk

We welcome your participation and support in either or both of these events.

The public engagement in stem cell research team are:

Stephen Bates (Research Fellow, Innogen)

Ana Coutinho (Science Communications Officer, Institute for Stem Cell Research)

Sarah Cunningham-Burley (Public Health Sciences)

Wendy Faulkner (Science Studies Unit)

Sarah Parry (Sociology and Innogen)

Austin Smith (Centre for Stem Cell Research, Cambridge)

Lisa Wood (Administrator, Innogen)