



Response to the BBSRC online consultation on the establishment of the UK National Stem Cell Co-op

Questions to be addressed in the consultation

Question 1. What do you believe should be the main activities of the UK Stem Cell Cooperative?

The SCC should add value to existing networks and collaborations within and between the broad stem cell research and policy communities. Its objectives should be to provide an opportunity across the biological, clinical and social sciences to inform policy, clinical and corporate engagement with the field, and wider public debate. There are already many discrete activities being supported by research council and other funding agencies (such as the EU, Wellcome Trust, RDAs) focusing on a quite common agenda; this new Cooperative should not simply be a vehicle covering the same ground.

We understand that the SCC would receive funding of the order of £150k per annum. Given this, what can be realistically achieved and add value, has to be carefully targeted and based on a developing set of activities that build on each other over the years ahead. In light of this we would suggest the following.

A single web-based source of information on UK stem cell research

Through a web-based central source, to act as a single portal for access for information on all UK stem cell research. The database would include the research of the existing regional networks and groupings, research funded under the Research Councils' Stem Cell Initiative, and individual researchers with other sources of funding. Links would be provided to relevant policies and codes of practice.

Organisation and facilitation of scientific meetings

Through the organisation and facilitation of scientific meetings, to promote the national interaction of researchers with regard to:

- specific areas of stem cell research where interaction will support and accelerate the development of the sub-field.
- consideration of strategic questions regarding the field of stem cell research as a whole. For example, the development of ethically sound experimental protocols and standards;
- the place of SC in the changing regulatory landscape and the specific implications of clinical regulation and governance that will affect the ways in which it will be deployed in practice;
- the relative success of SC in the UK compared to other countries, and how such 'success' might be measured;
- the potential for SC research as primarily an enabling technology for other fields and applications (as in say drug development) rather than directly itself;
- political regulation of the field (e.g. at EU level) and likely developments therein.

Support for UK activity at the national and international levels

As a result of the consideration of the kinds of strategic issues outlined above, to act as a forum for the UK's interdisciplinary stem cell research community and channel its views to relevant policy and professional bodies at both the national and international levels. If energetically pursued, the advocacy role would aim to support and maintain the UK's scientific, political and ethical leadership of the international stem cell community. In particular, the Cooperative would seek to make the UK the venue for the 2009 annual conference of the International Society for Stem Cell Research (ISSCR).

Identification of capacity needs

To identify through occasional web-based surveys:

- the capacity building being undertaken across the different bio and social-science networks
- possible areas of training need requiring further government support.

Coordination with public engagement activities

To help mobilise interest in and support for other workshops and meetings, especially those relating to public engagement being planned by the ESRC's Stem Cell Initiative and other meetings organised by the wider social science community, thereby ensuring maximum publicity and interest, and help ensure that event-planning in discrete networks does not duplicate what is already underway elsewhere.

Question 2. How do you think the UK Stem Cell Cooperative should be run?

If the Cooperative is to act as leader and international advocate of the UK stem cell scientific community with the full support and engagement of UK scientists and social scientists, it is important that its independence of any governmental or industrial interest is assured to ensure that no single agenda captures the work of the co-operative. In pursuit of this, it would be sensible to establish it as a non-profit making organisation with a governing board broadly representative of UK stem cell science.

The SCC should be administered centrally with a modestly funded secretariat, and this office should liaise with programme administrators across the different disciplines and networks that already exist to provide an e-forum for the exchange of information. Events should be primarily self-financing or co-funded from other sources.

Question 3. What would you contribute to the successful operation of the UK Stem Cell Cooperative?

The UK social science stem cell community has a wide range of activities being pursued regionally and nationally. At Research Council level, the ESRC is supporting a new Capacity Building and Awareness Raising Initiative in the social science of stem cells, details of which can be found at www.york.ac.uk/res/sci

The Initiative is also linked to the ESRC's related investments in genomics and health technologies, both substantively and at a generic level, in regards to methodological and theoretical analysis of the social dynamics of bioscience innovation. It will also help provide important support for future FP6/7 grant applications in the area. The strategic objectives of the initiative are to

- encourage a wider range of social science disciplines to engage with the field (in order to address current research gaps, which relate, for example, to law, psychology, economics, policy and regulatory studies, risk analysis, and business and organisational studies)
- generate greater interdisciplinarity across both social and natural science especially in light of recommendations made by the current Pattison review of the area
- exploit new opportunities for translational and international research

- enhance links between the Genomics Centres in this area
- anchor social science more firmly in policy-focused Stem Cell networks
- ensure excellent media coverage of social science activity in this area

The CBAR initiative would be happy to discuss how these plans might feed into and support the Collaborative network.

More generally, the wider social science network in this area has developed rapidly over the past three years and is currently engaged on research relating to a number of issues. Good links between the social science and bioscience communities are already established through the work of Professor Brian Salter (UEA) in regard to the East of England's SCN, the ESRC's Innogen Genomics Centre and the Scottish SCN, Professors Sarah Franklin and Erica Haimes and the MRC-supported hESCO network developed in liaison with UK stem cell/IVF clinics, the work of PEALS in Newcastle which has excellent links with the Institute for Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine, and through the ESRC's CBAR Office based at York, coordinated by Professor Andrew Webster. The UK social science network comprises about 40 senior researchers working on adult, embryonic and tissue engineering areas, and most are collaborating already with UK bioscientists and/or clinicians.

We are also in contact with the International SCI, the bioethics Working Group chaired by Professor Bartha Knoppers, and the Hinxton Group and can add value to that work through our UK and international research on regulation and governance. We have good ties too to both California and Wisconsin based bio- and social scientists.

Question 4. What other features would you like to see as part of the UK Stem Cell Cooperative?

We would like to see the Collaboration establish formal links to overseas networks (such as the Canadian network) and act as an international forum for dissemination of good UK practice and receipt of new developments within overseas networks. Members of the social science community have played an important role in regards to a number of FP6/7 projects contributing expertise in relation to governance, the social framing of ethics, and innovation dynamics. Elsewhere, individual research groups have strong links to the US, including, for example, SATSU's link with Wisconsin's labs, and PEALS link to American Society for Law, Medicine and Ethics in Boston.

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