

July 19, 2007

## Germany close to ending embryonic stem cell research ban

KRISTY BARNES

Germany has edged closer this week to removing a five-year blanket ban on embryonic stem cell research.

By a narrow majority, the country's 24-member National Ethics Council (NEC) voted to effectively overturn a law put in place by parliament in 2002, which bans the use of human embryonic stem cell lines created after 2001.

Embryonic stem cells are taken from very early-stage embryos (about five days old) and can be stimulated to develop into any type of tissue.

They are thought to hold great potential for treating a number of debilitating injuries or diseases although to date, no approved medical treatments have been derived from this method.

This week's news is encouraging for German-based scientists, who have long argued that the ban was stifling scientific innovation in the country. Many other countries do not have such strict rules regarding this type of research.

For example, countries such as the United Kingdom, China, South Korea, Japan, Belgium and Sweden, all now have legislation allowing carefully regulated therapeutic cloning, with Spain, South Africa and Australia likely to soon join them.

The majority of Germany's NEC now appear to agree with the viewpoint of its scientific community: "If the current rules remain, German science will be hopelessly sidelined," said Horst Dreier, one of the 14 members who approved of the changes.

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church continues to oppose the practice of playing around with human embryonic stem cells for experimental purposes, particularly when other sources of stem cells from adults and umbilical cord blood are available.

Stem cell research is also staunchly opposed in the US by the current government and much of the nation's conservative population, and although all types of stem cell research are legal in the country, any form of federal funding for embryonic stem cell research is currently banned.

However, despite this week's events, the issue is far from decided in Germany and fierce division is anticipated when The German Parliament begins to debate the issue later this year.