

Italian bioethics committee in uproar

Stem-cell researchers in Italy are worried that a shake-up of the country's bioethics advisory body could hinder a balanced representation of their ethical position on embryonic stem-cell research.

Members of the National Bioethics Committee are nominated directly by the Italian prime minister, and have in the past been predominantly Catholic. The group expresses opinions on and suggests solutions to bioethical issues, and helps prepare legislation on relevant topics.

In October 2000, the committee, which at the time included a number of scientists

and independent thinkers, expressed a favourable opinion toward embryonic stem-cell research. But in 2002, then prime minister Silvio Berlusconi renewed the committee, and since then there has been increasing conflict between its Catholic and secular members. Then in 2004, the parliament approved one of the most restrictive laws worldwide on stem-cell research.

Last year, the current prime minister, Romano Prodi, streamlined the committee from 52 to 40 members, and increased the percentage of women from 25% to almost 40%. The proportion of Catholic members remained at well over 50%.

Prodi also appointed as the committee's president 76-year-old Francesco Casavola, a former president of Italy's supreme court, who is currently director of the Treccani Institute. Casavola, a moderate Catholic, appointed two secular members and one Catholic member as vice-presidents. They were Cinzia Caporale, a bioethicist and former president of the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee; Elena Cattaneo, a stem-cell researcher at the University of Milan; and Luca Marini, a lecturer in European Union Law at the University of Rome La Sapienza.

The new committee was fractious from the start. Almost half its members advocated changing the voting system from a simple majority — perhaps to a system that describes, with justifications, the range of views across the committee. This is similar to the way in which the German National Ethics Council works. "Such a procedure

encourages a constructive discussion and diminishes conflicts," says Jens Reich, former deputy chair of the German group.

On 18 September, three members of the Italian committee wrote an internal memo criticizing what they called Casavola's unilateral way of making decisions. In particular, they criticized his decision to choose members of the influential public group Science and Life, which strongly opposes research on embryonic stem cells, as committee representatives on important national and international panels. For example, the committee's representative

on the commission that is revising the reproductive-technology law is the president of Science and Life.

The letter was leaked to the press, and Casavola tendered his resignation. At the end of September, Prodi asked him to stay and ratified Casavola's proposal to replace the three vice-presidents with new ones: a rabbi, a Catholic who takes secular positions, and a member of Science and Life.

On 8 October, Casavola wrote in a letter to the committee that the former vice-presidents had not adequately defended him against growing criticism. Prodi's undersecretary Giampaolo D'Andrea, defending Casavola's decision to a parliamentary commission, said that there were "inner conflicts between the vice-presidents", a point that members of the committee strongly contest.

The current situation worries Cattaneo. "Italian science needs to rise to the level of other European countries," she says, "which means also having an institution able to make decisions that can strike an appropriate balance between medical benefits and justified ethical concerns of the nation."

In what is likely to be a turbulent meeting on 26 October, the committee will have to produce advice about the time at which an embryo can be considered dead and could be used for research. "But with the current unbalanced representation," says Carlo Redi, a stem-cell researcher and scientific adviser at the San Matteo Hospital in Pavia, "I can hardly imagine that there could be good news for science".

Emiliano Feresin



Francesco Casavola has made big changes to the committee.

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