

the European Parliament are in favour of the research, recognizing the long-term potential to treat debilitating disease. Others maintain that it is immoral to exploit a technique that uses human embryos — even spare embryos from *in vitro* fertilization clinics that would otherwise be destroyed, and from which nearly all experimental human ES cell lines are derived. The 2006 debate was resolved with both the European Parliament and Council agreeing to fund such research, provided that it didn't involve the creation of new human ES cells, and provided that it was not carried out in those countries — such as Germany — whose national law banned it.

Stem-cell researchers around the world breathed a sigh of relief, knowing how a decision in Europe could also influence funding decisions elsewhere. The outcome of the present debate offers similar influence. But there are already signs that some members of the European Parliament will once again try to outlaw funding of research involving human ES cells.

Rather than wait for these views to gain unchecked momentum, a group including UK research-funding bodies the Wellcome Trust, the Medical Research Council, the British Heart Foundation and Parkinson's UK last week issued a joint statement in support of the research, explaining the benefits of the work and the rationale to include it in Horizon 2020.

It is a wise move that should help to anchor the coming debate to reality. Biology is complicated, which makes it easy for politicians to mislead the public and colleagues — intentionally or unintentionally — in emotive areas. The general public, and politicians, have every right to question whether the ends justify the means used by medical researchers. But they also have the right to reliable information.

The statement outlines the remarkable progress that stem-cell researchers have made since 2006, which has led in the past 12 months to the first approvals for clinical trials of potential therapies involving human ES cells — for a type of blindness called macular degeneration and for spinal-cord injury. In addition, scientists have discovered

how to force adult cells back to an embryonic-like state. The resulting induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells can then be grown into particular cell types and used to understand mechanisms of disease at the cellular level. In the long term, they may also be useful for therapy.

The most insidious claim of those who oppose human ES cell research holds that iPS cells, which can be derived from a particular patient's own cells and are ethically unburdened, eliminate the need for human ES cells in research and therapy. That concept sounds appealing, but it is simply not true. Scientists understand little of the differences between the two sorts of stem cells and it will take years of comparative work to do so.

One particular event that makes biomedical researchers worry is a decision taken last year by the European Court of Justice. In October it ruled that patenting of inventions involving human ES cells was illegal because it was immoral — and as a consequence, human ES cell research must also be immoral (see *Nature* **480**, 310–312; 2011). *Nature* condemned this ruling as being beyond the court's juridical and technical competencies (see *Nature* **480**, 291–292; 2011). But members of the European Parliament who oppose human ES cell research stealthily inserted a reference to it during an unrelated resolution on broad patenting of essential biological processes in animal and plant breeding, which was adopted on 10 May.

Horizon 2020 has to be approved by the European Parliament and Council by mid-2013 so that first calls for proposals can be launched at the start of 2014. The UK research funding agencies' statement is a good start to a continuous campaign of education and transparency that stem-cell researchers from all interested European countries must maintain for the next year. Just as cell-culture medium needs to be renewed to keep its cargo alive, a political message has to be constantly renewed if it is to stay alive in political minds. ■

Serious questions

Nature Publishing Group's reader survey on lab-safety practices needs your input.

Scientific laboratories are dangerous places. Noxious chemicals, naked flames and nasty microbes abound. The white laboratory coat, a long-standing symbol of science to many outsiders, offers some protection against these implicit threats. White coats are ubiquitous in fictional labs in films and on television, but how many lab scientists actually wear one? And, perhaps more importantly, how many should do, but don't? Are you wearing one right now? Are your colleagues? Does it matter? Would you tell anybody if it did? And, if not a lab coat, what about those protective goggles? They get so hot in summer, don't they? Is it really that big a deal if you leave them on the hook just this once?

It is easy for scientists, especially those who have been around for a while and so tend to be in charge, to take a cavalier attitude to safety, purely because science is so much safer now than it was when they began. And although it is true that laboratories and lab culture have improved since the reckless days of the 1950s and 1960s, accidents still happen. Sometimes, these accidents are fatal. Laboratories do still kill people.

In an Editorial on the subject last April (*Nature* **472**, 259; 2011), prompted by the death of physics and astronomy undergraduate student Michele Dufault in a workshop at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, this publication warned against complacency

when it comes to lab safety. A common complaint among environmental health and safety officers in universities and elsewhere, we noted, is that "there is no good source of consistent data on laboratory accidents, which could be studied to determine effective safety interventions". That the working environment for scientists is safer now than in times past is less important than whether it is as safe now as it could, or should, be — and there is at present no way to say for sure that it is.

"It is easy for scientists to take a cavalier attitude to safety."

Nature Publishing Group (NPG) has now joined with the University of California, Los Angeles, and the software firm BioRAFT to try to fill in some of the blanks. (BioRAFT, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has investment from Digital Science, owned by NPG's parent company, Macmillan.) Together, the three have launched an online survey of international laboratory safety and working culture. Some readers will already have received invitations to participate, but everyone else is welcome, too: the survey can be found at go.nature.com/7ldjli. It should take about 15 minutes to complete and is anonymous — although there is an option to leave an e-mail address for follow-up questions. The organizers hope that tens of thousands of working scientists will respond to questions about the environments they work in and the attitudes that they and their colleagues have to health and safety regulations. The survey also addresses research practice, including how many people regularly work alone in a lab, and how often; training provision; and whether scientists feel able to raise concerns about safety. Please take the survey. Someone, some day, will benefit. ■

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