

Brazil Frees US\$ 5 million for Stem Cell Research, But Not Everyone Is Happy

Contributed by Carla Almeida
Monday, 12 September 2005

Stem cell research was given a boost in Brazil recently, with the announcement that 41 projects will share nearly US\$ 5 million in funding in 2005 and 2006.

The ministries of health and of science will fund the research, which will include basic laboratory experiments, pre-clinical trials using animals, and clinical research on people.

Stem cells are 'template' cells that can specialize into others such as bone or muscle. Researchers hope to harness this ability to cure disease.

The projects will receive a total of 11 million reais (US\$ 4.7 million), with US\$ 3.4 million being released this year and the rest in 2006.

The research projects were chosen from more than 100 put forward for grants announced in April, a month after Brazil passed its 'biosafety law'. The law authorized the use of stem cells derived from human embryos.

Religious groups had opposed this aspect of the law, calling instead for a total ban on stem cell research. Many scientists, however, argued strongly in favour of studies using both adult and embryonic stem cells.

Stem cells from adults can only develop into the type of tissue from which they originate. Embryonic cells are more versatile and can develop into any kind of cell.

Of the 41 projects selected, only three will use embryonic stem cells, four will study both adult and embryonic cells, and the remaining 34 will work on adult cells alone. For some researchers, this has been a disappointment.

"It is a wasted opportunity," says geneticist Lygia da Veiga Pereira, of the University of São Paulo's Bioscience Institute, whose application to study embryonic stem cells was rejected.

"We fought so hard to win our right to study embryonic stem cells but when the government provides grants, these projects are not contemplated."

The Brazilian government wants to focus research on verifying the potential of stem cells to treat disease. But many scientists want to discover more about how cells turn into different types of tissues, which, they say, requires using embryonic stem cells.

This article appeared originally in Science and Development Network - www.scidev.net.