

Brazil Supreme Greenlights Stem Cell Research

Contributed by Luisa Massarani
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The Brazilian Supreme Federal Court voted by a narrow margin to uphold legislation allowing research on embryonic stem cells on May 29, after almost three years of deadlock.

Research using embryonic stem cells is permitted under the country's Biosafety Legislation, approved in March 2005, although several limitations are applied, such as only using embryos created by in vitro fertilization - and frozen for three years - that would be discarded anyway.

The research has remained controversial however - particularly with religious and anti-abortion groups - as the process involves removing stem cells from embryos at a few days old, which destroys them.

The 2005 decision was contested in the same year by Brazil's then attorney general, Claudio Fonteles, who said that the legislation was against the right to life and human dignity, and therefore unconstitutional.

The ministers of the supreme court began discussing Fonteles's petition in March. But voting was interrupted at the request of the minister Carlos Alberto Direito, who wanted more time to evaluate the case.

Two days of intense debate resulted in a final tally of six out of 11 votes in favor of upholding the 2005 approval, with no amendments. The remaining five ministers voted to uphold the basic legislation but with restrictions.

The main concern raised was the need to control scientific studies. The minister Cezar Peluzo highlighted the importance of having a system for evaluating and approving requests on embryonic stem cell studies, such as an ethics commission.

"It's key to impose conditions for the research activities," affirmed the minister Ricardo Lewandowski during the voting.

Scientists, patient groups and the minister of health, José Gomes Temporão, celebrated the decision.

"The decision is a victory for life, since it meets the expectations of thousands of patients who have hope for curing their diseases. The research on stem cells opens several possibilities for finding answers for diseases that currently have no treatments. The result allows Brazilian science to take a new position in the international scenario," said Temporão in a statement.

The National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil (CNBB) "regretted" the decision.

"The decision in the Supreme Court exhibited a significant divergence on the issue, showing that there are ministers who have ethical positions similar to the CNBB. That is, it is not about religious matters, but about promotion and defense of human life," says a statement distributed by the CNBB.

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