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Ethics of European-Chinese biomedical research collaborations

The European-Chinese co-operative consortium, BIONET, dedicated to the Ethical Governance of Biological and Biomedical Research announces its second workshop, taking place 9 – 11 October 2007 in Shanghai, on the topic of „ethical governance of reproductive and stem cell research and stem cell banks“, at the CAS-MPG Partner Institute for Computational Biology in cooperation with the Shanghai Medical Ethics Association, in Shanghai.

Background

In recent years, many scientific observers highlight China as an emerging hub for stem cell research. The Chinese government has identified stem cell research as a key strategic field, and provides direct funding through the Ministry of Science and Technology as well as the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In China, there is both focus on laboratory research aiming to improve procedures for deriving and cultivating stem cell lines and also clinical research into potential stem cell applications in neurodegenerative diseases, muscular dystrophy as well as other diseases. In tandem with these developments, a number of guidelines and regulations have also been passed in China to address some of the many ethical challenges surrounding this research.

Notwithstanding this increasing regulatory focus on stem cell research, just as has been the case in Europe, a number of concerns have been raised in China about the enforcement of regulations, especially regarding the provision of ‘unproven’ stem cell treatments. Also, some Chinese commentators have suggested that the regulations on scientific misconduct from 2006 were much needed, as they raised questions about whether the current system of scientific peer review was sufficient to ensure good quality results and to deter misconduct.

It is with these many ethical challenges surrounding stem cell research in mind, that 50 Chinese and European experts will meet in Shanghai on 9-11 October to discuss and exchange views on issues of ethical oversight and governance in stem cell research.

Short description of BIONET

BIONET is a network of European and Chinese researchers which will work to undertake research, training, workshops and conferences, together with the production of relevant materials and documentation, on the ethical governance of research in the life sciences and biomedicine within and between China and European countries. The project will run from October 2006 to September 2009. Website: www.bionet-china.org

Objectives

BIONET workshops have a number of objectives:

- To provide a platform for scholars with different cultural and academic backgrounds to improve understanding
- To provide capacity building for a range of professionals across China who are involved in research, research ethics and decision making in these areas, including members of ethics review boards
- To explore differences in approaches, and current themes around, ethical review and regulation, particularly around informed consent
- To enhance understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to the regulation of biomedical research and practice
- To gather evidence of problems, cases and practices in the ethical governance of research in this area, as they are experienced on the ground by different professional groups in different regions in relation to different issues.
- To define lines of future studies in the clinics of doctor/patient relationships, and on other issues which may arise
- To facilitate the development of evidence based social scientific research on ethics, and awareness of the need to research the experience and views of patients and research subjects.
- To learn from each other about the ethical governance of stem cell research.
- To visit places where real research activities are taking place so as to improve knowledge and mutual understanding.

Participants

About 50 participants from China and Europe have taken part in the BIONET workshop on stem cell research. These include stem cell researchers, bioethicists, lawyers, social scientists as well as government representatives.

Interviews can be requested and information is available through Dr. Ayo Wahlberg at the secretariat of the Expert Group at the BIOS centre, London School of Economics in Europe and through Prof. Wolfgang Hennig, CAS-MPG Partner Institute for Computational Biology.

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