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Ethics of stem cell research brings Chinese and European scientists together

Around 100 Chinese and European stem cell scientists, reproductive medicine practitioners, ethicists, social scientists and legal experts are meeting at a conference from 1-3 April 2008 in Changsha, the capital of the People's Republic of China's Hunan Province. The three-day conference marks the halfway point for BIONET, a Chinese-European Collaboration on the ethics of biological and biomedical research, which is funded by the European Commission. Participants will hear talks from among many others Prof. Lu Guangxiu (Institute of Reproduction and Stem Cell Engineering, Central South University, Changsha), Dr. Stephen Minger (Stem Cell Biology Laboratory, King's College London), Prof. Sheng Huizhen, and Prof. Moustapha Kassem (Medical Biotechnology Centre, University of Southern Denmark).

“We look forward to the future of biomedical technology. People live on the same earth and share in all biomedical outcomes. We need more mutual understanding and respect to seek Great Harmony and to reserve our differences on minor points for the progress of all human beings,” said conference host Prof. Lu Guangxiu, Director of the Hunan Institute of Reproduction and Stem Cell Engineering & Reproductive and Genetic Hospital CITIC-Xiangya.

Stem cell research holds great promise in an ongoing and increasingly global quest for treatments for a number of debilitating degenerative diseases – from muscular dystrophy to Alzheimer's disease and spinal cord injuries. It is hoped that once scientists have understood the self-renewing and ‘pluri-potent’ powers of stem cells (to form into any kind of human cell), they will be able to harness and direct them to treat human diseases which currently have no cure.

Stem cells can be sourced from embryos (human embryonic stem cells), foetuses (e.g. neural stem cells) or adults (e.g. cord blood stem cells); they are manipulated and cultivated in laboratories; with the hope that they can then be transplanted back into human patients in the treatment of degenerative diseases. Each of these stages of research and treatment (sourcing, manipulation and transplantation) embodies ethical challenges, and different countries have responded in different ways. Some countries allow embryonic stem cell research and/or the creation of human-animal hybrids to further research, while others have banned these practices. One of the key tasks for participants at the BIONET conference in Changsha, which has also received financial support from the United Kingdom's Medical Research Council (MRC), will be to examine how international collaboration between Chinese and European stem cell scientists should be ethically monitored when there are different legal frameworks, ethical norms and cultural understandings involved.

One of the concrete outcomes from the conference will be an interim report from BIONET's Expert Group who are currently working on a set of “guidelines for best practice in the

Ethical Governance of Europe-China Research Collaborations in the Life Sciences and Biomedicine”. The BIONET Expert Group, which is chaired by Prof. Christoph Rehmann-Sutter, University of Basel (Switzerland) and co-chaired by Prof. Qiu Renzong, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing), consists of ten Chinese and European members.

“Collaborations between East and West in biomedicine and biotechnology need collaboration also in bioethics. In sensitive questions of stem cell and embryo research, differences in law and culture exist. But the ethical concerns are not so far from each other,” said Prof. Christoph Rehmann-Sutter, Professor of Philosophy and Head of the Unit for Ethics in the Biosciences, University of Basel.

For more information on BIONET please visit:

www.bionet-china.org

or contact:

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Appendixes

List of members of Expert Group:

- Professor Lu Guangxiu, Institute of Human Reproduction and Stem Cell Engineering, Changsha
- Professor Qiu Renzong, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing (co-Chair)
- Professor Cong Yali, Peking University Health Science Centre, Beijing
- Professor Zhai Xiaomei, Peking Union Medical College, Research Centre for Bioethics, Beijing
- Dr. Ole Döring, Institute of Asian Affairs, Hamburg, Germany
- Professor Herbert Gottweis, Department of Political Science, University of Vienna, Austria
- Professor Wolfgang Hennig, Institute of Genetics, University of Mainz, Germany & CAS-MPG Partner Institute for Computational Biology, Shanghai, China
- Professor Genevra Richardson, School of Law, King's College, United Kingdom
- Professor Christoph Rehmann-Sutter, Unit for Ethics in the Biosciences, University of Basel, Switzerland (Chair)

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 and is funded by the European Commission's Sixth Framework Programme (FP6). Website: www.bionet-china.org