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Tighter controls needed on 'stem cell tourism' say European and Chinese experts

Vulnerable patients who travel abroad for unproven and potentially unsafe stem cell treatments need to be better protected says a report published by a team of expert researchers from Europe and China today (Friday 4 September).

The report calls for countries to develop more effective regulation of experimental stem cell procedures by insisting on rigorous clinical studies and ethical reviews before they can be offered as treatments.

The proposals come from a group of 10 Chinese and European experts, from the fields of medicine, ethics, law, political science and social science. Their Expert Group is an independent part of the BIONET project, a Sino-European collaboration based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

The BIONET Expert Group report sets out 30 recommendations for the ethical and structural development of European-Chinese collaborative research in the biological and biomedical sciences. The recommendations are based on a series of five workshops and conferences organised by BIONET in Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Changsha and Shenzhen. These covered the topics of stem cell research, clinical trials and genomics research and involved participation from leading scientists, ethicists, lawyers and policy makers from Europe and China.

The growing global stem cell tourism economy has been fuelled by claims of treatments for hitherto untreatable conditions, the formation of patient networks, falling travel costs and the establishment of high quality medical facilities combined with undeveloped or non-existent national regulations.

While most stem cell therapies have not undergone clinical trials, clinics throughout the world, including Europe, Asia and the Americas, are offering patients – who are often extremely vulnerable and have exhausted all other options – expensive and unproven treatments.

Qiu Renzong, Professor of Bioethics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the co-chair of the BIONET Expert Group, said: 'Stem cell research is tremendously exciting and may lead to potential treatments. However its development must be governed in an ethical and responsible way if it is to fulfil its potential and not experience a backlash from public opinion.'

'Many countries, including China and those in the EU, are now starting to regulate these therapies. However, if patients are to be properly protected, regulation needs to be enforceable and effective.'

The BIONET Expert Group's report makes a number of other recommendations on Sino-European research collaborations including greater clarity and more precise regulation of clinical trials, international agreements about the ethics and transparency of biobanking – the storing of human blood and tissue for research purposes – and the establishment of a permanent China-Europe partnership on research ethics.

Christoph Rehmann-Sutter, co-Chair of the Expert Group and Professor of Bioethics, said: 'European and Chinese research teams are collaborating on some really exciting bioscience. As with all relationships that reach across cultures, difficult issues can arise because of social, moral, political and other differences. Our recommendations are intended to sketch out where these problems can arise and how to prevent them. We hope this will allow research to be steered in an ethically sound way.'

BIONET has spent three years examining developments in biological and biomedical research and practice in Europe and China. The BIONET Expert Group's recommendations are being presented for approval at the project's final conference in London from 2 - 4 September.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

BIONET is a Consortium of 21 European and Chinese partners examining the challenges facing the ethical governance of research in the life sciences and biomedicine in China and the EU. It is funded under the European Commission Sixth Framework programme with support from the United Kingdom's Medical Research Council.

The BIONET conference is taking place at the Wellcome Collection Conference Centre in Euston Road, London NW1 from 2-4 September 2009.

The BIONET Expert Group report – *Draft recommendations for best practice in the ethical governance of biological and biomedical research collaborations between Chinese and European scientists* is available to journalists from the LSE press office.

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