



THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF CANADA

POSITION PAPER ON

THE USE OF STEM CELLS
FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES

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The Catholic Women's League of Canada
National Office
1 – 160 Murray Park Road, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3J 3X5
Phone: (204) 927-2310 Toll-free: (888) 656-4040
Fax: (204) 927-2321 Toll-free: (888) 831-9507

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Ad Hoc Committee Members

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The Catholic Women's League of Canada **Position Paper on** **The Use of Stem Cells for Research Purposes**

The Catholic Women's League of Canada is the largest national organization of women in Canada, with more than 102,000 members represented in every province and territory and in the military.

New scientific discoveries frequently pose ethical questions for League members as well as for all of society. Through the resolutions process, members of the League have addressed ethical questions with respect to new reproductive technologies. Resolution 2002.09, Human Stem Cell Research, is the most recent expression of members' concern.

Members in councils throughout Canada cherish life from fertilization to natural death. This advocacy has taken many forms as these dedicated people commit themselves to work for a just society in which all human life is respected and protected. Beginning in 1963, with the first resolution passed at national convention, members have invested countless hours to introduce plans, express concerns or state the League's position on the rights of the unborn.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *The Gift of Life, Donum Vitae*, states that "The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his [or her] rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life."¹ This is further emphasized in Pope John Paul II's statement to Catholic universities in which he stresses "...the centrality of the inalienable dignity of the human person in scientific research..."²

The Roman Catholic Church supports and subscribes to the positive benefits of scientific research. The Catholic Health Association of Canada in its recent *Health Ethics Guide* states that "Research should be directed to the benefits of persons, the common good and the natural environment. Researchers are to conduct their studies with the highest respect for the dignity of persons involved."³ Research, however, cannot exploit persons for the benefit of others. In more direct terms, human lives cannot be sacrificed for the sake of research.

Stem cell research has the potential to revolutionize scientific research into the causes of many health disorders, and there is strong evidence to support the "therapeutic hope" that this research holds. The evidence suggests, for example, that stem cells may have the potential to reverse a variety of chronic diseases for which there are currently no cures. This may be achieved by repopulating tissues with the correctly functioning cells. The disorders now being studied in this way include diabetes, heart disease, some liver disease and arthritis.

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, 1987, 1:1.

² "John Paul II Urges Catholic Universities to Humanize Globalization," Zenit News Agency, December 5, 2002.

³ Catholic Health Association of Canada, *Health Ethics Guide*, Ottawa, 2000, p. 61.

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Stem cells may also offer the hope of correcting severely disabling, and commonly fatal, metabolic conditions in children.⁴

The moral dilemma, however, lies in what sources of stem cells will be used. Some scientists want to do research on the embryonic stem cells, which are considered easier to reproduce and manipulate in the laboratory. The embryo, however, is the earliest stage of human development and, to obtain embryonic stem cells, the human embryo must be destroyed.

“There is recent scientific evidence to suggest that the potential for the research use of adult stem cells is greater than had been anticipated earlier.”⁵ Most importantly, the use of adult stem cells does not result in the death of the donor.

In August 2000, Pope John Paul II urged the use of adult cells as the proper method of stem cell research.⁶ One source of adult stem cells is the placenta. Therefore, the League encourages the implementation and use of placental banks, such as the one established at the Catholic University of Rome, to store umbilical cord blood for future use. At present, Canada's only public bank for umbilical cord blood is in Edmonton, Alberta. This innovative technology can be a pro-life alternative to embryonic stem cell use. The Gift of Life, *Donum Vitae*, teaches that “No objective, even though noble in itself, such as a foreseeable advantage to science, or to other human beings... , can in any way justify experimentation on embryos”⁷

Summary Position

The Catholic Women's League of Canada strongly supports the ethical use of adult stem cells for research purposes. The League is asking the federal government to protect the embryo, the earliest beginnings of human life, by prohibiting research on human embryonic stem cells. The League concurs with a statement issued by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops that “While we realize that our position on protection of the embryo will preclude embryonic stem cell research in which so many hopes have been invested, we are convinced that adult stem cell research, which is showing remarkable promise, can still go forward and has every potential to fulfill these hopes.”⁸

⁴ Jamieson, Dr. Christine E., “Stem Cell Research and Its Implications,” *Review*, autumn 2002, pp. 16-22.

⁵ Rowell, Mary, “Response to the Position Paper of The Catholic Women's League of Canada re: Stem Cell Research,” Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute, The University of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, 2003.

⁶ Pontifical Academy for Life, “Declaration on the Production and the Scientific and Therapeutic Use of Human Embryonic Stem Cells, Vatican City, 25 August 2000.

⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, 1987, 1:4.

⁸ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Statement by the Canadian Conference on Catholic Bishops on Bill C-13, *An Act Respecting Assisted Human Reproduction*,” 29 January 2003.