

E.U. Commission Rejects Plea to Block Stem Cell Research Funding

THE FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

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BRUSSELS—The European Commission today turned down a request by pro-life organizations to block E.U. funding for research using embryonic stem cells—causing many scientists to breathe a sigh of relief. The commission says the existing rules under the European Union's science program, Horizon 2020, are appropriate and will not change.

Last month, a citizens' initiative called One of Us [asked the commission](#) to stop funding research in which embryos are destroyed. Because the initiative reached 1 million verified signatures from seven or more member states, the commission had to formally consider the proposal.

"We have engaged with this Citizens' Initiative and given its request all due attention," [said research commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn in a statement today](#). "However, Member States and the European Parliament agreed to continue funding research in this area for a reason. Embryonic stem cells are unique and offer the potential for life-saving treatments, with clinical trials already underway."

The commission's answer is "very wise," says Tullio Pozzan, director of the biomedical sciences department at Italy's National Research Council and a member of Science Europe's medical committee. The request from One of Us "was not based on scientific considerations, but on philosophical or religious" ones, he says. Stem cell research should be continued even though human therapy is not currently practical, Pozzan adds.

Robin Buckle, head of regenerative medicine at the U.K. Medical Research Council, also praised the commission's decision. “It was essential that the Commission endorsed its existing support in this area,” Buckle said, “as any new restrictions could potentially have been highly damaging to European science and competitiveness.”

The pertinent regulations among E.U. member states range from permissive, for instance in Belgium and the United Kingdom, to an outright ban on research using human embryonic stem cells in Poland and Lithuania. At the E.U. level, research is eligible for Horizon 2020 funding only if it is legal in the country where it takes place and has passed a scientific and ethical review. In addition, scientists receiving E.U. money may use leftover embryos granted by couples after in vitro fertilization procedures, but are not allowed to create embryonic stem cell lines for their research.

The proponents of the One of Us petition say this arrangement is too liberal. For support, they cite a 2011 ruling by the European Court of Justice in *Brüstle v. Greenpeace*, which they say “indicates that fecundation is the beginning of human life and in the name of human dignity excludes the patenting of any procedure that involves or supposes the destruction of a human embryo.”

But the commission says this ruling is not relevant to science funding. “[T]he ruling was limited to the patentability of biotechnological inventions and did not deal with the question of whether such research can be carried out and whether it can be funded,” [the commission argued in another statement today](#).

Under the previous E.U. research program, from 2007 to 2013, the European Union spent €156.7 million on 27 collaborative projects in health research involving the use of human embryonic stem cells. The total amounts to 2.6% of the overall E.U. spending on health research during that period.