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Stem cells: time for a public debate

At the end of September the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) voted to support the use of embryonic stem cells: a decision that could have unimaginable implications for generations to come. A group of research scientists at the University of Geneva is hoping to find out more about heart disease by studying these cells. The research community is placing high hopes in stem cells and their potential. What makes them so special is that they are still "immature" i.e. their development is not yet fully fixed, so that theoretically they can be turned into any type of cell. Scientists are now faced with the challenge of tracking down the mechanisms which help stem cells grow into healthy nerve cells rather than cancer cells. This could help to cure diseases such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's. While the SNF's



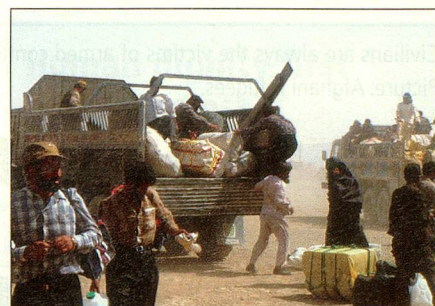
Pablo Crivelli

"The public hearing process will be launched in the early months of 2002."

decision gave cause for celebration in Geneva, it was reported to have irritated Federal Councillor Ruth Dreifuss. Green MPs called for the resignation of Heidi Diggelmann, President of the National Research Council, and accused the institution of violating democratic rights. The reason for this criticism? The SNF's decision of 28 September threw out the reservations of the National Ethics Commission for Humane Medicine and the Department of Interior. Both had asked the SNF to postpone its decision in order to allow time for a public discussion on the topic. The worst "mistake" the SNF made was to place the facts before the politicians. The National Science Foundation justified its decision by pointing out the enormous potential of biotechnology as well as the necessity of maintaining a high level of research in Switzerland. Not only did the SNSF's decision once more underscore the chronic reluctance of politicians to keep pace with scientific progress; it is also credited with forcing the government to fill the legal vacuum in this area more quickly. While regulations governing embryos are strict, there is no law banning the use of stem cells. The public hearing process will be launched in the early months of 2002: Sooner or later Swiss citizens will also have to decide whether it is permissible to use embryonic stem cells for scientific purposes. Research scientists are hoping for clear guidelines as well as a degree of flexibility – as are companies who are eager to harvest the fruits of their investments.

Pablo Crivelli

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm



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Behind the gigantic facade of international politics there are real people, many of whom lack the barest necessities. Starvation threatens hundreds of thousands in Nicaragua. Families travel to Managua in the hope of aid. The photo shows the child of an affected family in Northern Nicaragua.

COVER: Oscar Navarrete/Latinphoto

SWISS REVIEW

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