

Vatican and biopharma company collaborate

Tom Gallagher | Jul. 27, 2011



Fr. Tomasz Trafny and Dr. Robin Smith (CNS photos/Katarzyna Artymiak)

Mission Management

The political and moral battle lines around embryonic stem cell research are well-defined. However, scientific research into the medical uses of adult stem cells has taken an interesting step this past year. The Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture has implemented a joint initiative agreement with a U.S. publicly-traded, for-profit company, NeoStem Inc., an international biopharmaceutical company.

The joint initiative will be implemented through each organization's charitable arm: NeoStem's Stem for Life Foundation, and STOQ International (Science, Theology and the Ontological Quest), which is a new partnership between the Pontifical Council for Culture, the six pontifical universities and the University of Notre Dame's Reilly Center for Science, Technology and Values in Indiana.

The council and NeoStem have announced an international conference, "Adult Stem Cells: Science and the Future of Man and Culture," to be held Nov. 9-11 in Rome. According to a press release, its 350 invited guests will include experts in adult stem cell research and other medical leaders, but also "church and scientific leaders, policymakers, ethicists, educators, ministers of health from around the world, ambassadors to the Holy See, and representatives of the stem cell therapeutic business community to foster a multidisciplinary approach."

NCR recently spoke with Polish priest Fr. Tomasz Trafny, head of the Science and Faith Department at the council, and Dr. Robin Smith, chief executive officer of NeoStem, to better understand the nature of this relationship.

NCR: How did you two meet?

Trafny: Our offices in New York City are in the same building and some people introduced us to each other. We had plenty of meetings, e-mail exchanges and conference calls. It was an evolutionary process to get to know each other.

What are the particulars of the joint initiative agreement?

Trafney: The agreement is confidential, but it lays out the strategies for the project. The pontifical council is looking for solutions, to link with science, to band together, to learn from each other. Science and religion need each other.

Smith: The partnership is focused on four things: first, to influence public perception regarding stem cells; second, to promote the advancement of adult stem cell technology; third, to create bioethics study programs in high schools and universities; and finally, to update and train a new generation of pastors and academics on the bioethics of adult stem cell research.

What gives you confidence that this collaboration will bear fruit?

Trafney: There is a principle of trust. We trust each other. We are responsible for what we declare. We share the same vision.

What is unique about NeoStem's technology?

Smith: NeoStem has the worldwide exclusive license to a specific cell type called VSEL. These unique cells are very small and have many of the beneficial characteristics of an embryonic cell without moral and ethical obstacles. These VSELs appear to have the ability to signal the body to heal damaged tissue, to grow blood vessels and differentiate into cells of different organs without teratoma or cancer formation. As a matter of fact, these cells are circulating in all of us right now. While the research is still in its early phases of development we see the promise of this research as transformational.

Will NeoStem ever do scientific research on embryonic stem cells?

Smith: No. We are focused on the regenerative properties of adult stem cells, which is our driving focus. We believe we can deliver results in a safe way that doesn't have the ethical considerations. Everyone can be a supporter of adult stem cell research.

Does NeoStem qualify as a Catholic, socially-responsible investment?

Smith: Yes, [NeoStem] would be a great profile for an investor who values human life.

Trafney: It's true because we share the same values on adult stem cell research, which is compatible with religious values, and not only Catholic, but many other religions as well.

What has been the reaction of NeoStem's board, employees and shareholders to this association?

Smith: People are excited about the partnership because we're making history here. It's groundbreaking and part of a paradigm shift. It's a tremendous opportunity for the Vatican and for NeoStem. And we will be promoting science and medicine. Together we will be training future generations and advancing science.

Why is your association with the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture important to you as a Jewish person?

Smith: NeoStem does not have the reach of the Vatican. We're really humbled to be chosen.

[Tom Gallagher writes NCR's Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

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www.neostem.com

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?Adult Stem Cells: Science and the Future of Man and Culture? conference, Nov. 9-11
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