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## NEWS OF THE WEEK

### STEM CELLS: Ethical Oocytes: Available for a Price Gretchen Vogel

**TORONTO, CANADA**--Obtaining human oocytes for embryonic stem (ES) cell experiments raises tricky ethical issues. Researchers want to be sure the donation is voluntary and that women are well-informed of the risks--two areas in which now-discredited stem cell researcher Woo Suk Hwang was faulted. At a recent meeting here, Ann Kiessling, director of the Bedford Stem Cell Research Foundation in Somerville, Massachusetts, described her group's successful efforts to recruit donors. Despite a rigorous screening process that eliminated more than 9 of 10 potential donors, the team had no shortage of oocytes. "We ran out of funds before we ran out of donors," she says. Nevertheless, her experience suggests that collecting hundreds of oocytes ethically and safely will be expensive and slow.

The group, which collected oocytes for its own experiments and also for the company Advanced Cell Technology in Worcester, Massachusetts, first placed an ad in *The Boston Globe* in September 2000 that read, "Research team seeks women aged 21 to 35 with at least one child to donate eggs for stem cell research; compensation for time, travel and child care expenses." The requirement that women already have one child does bar some potential donors, Kiessling says, but it greatly lowers certain risks. If a woman has had a successful pregnancy, she says, "you know she's fertile, you know how she manages the hormones, and you lower the chance that 10 years later she might have fertility problems" that might be traced back to the donation.

The *Globe* ad did not prompt a single response, Kiessling says, but ads in smaller regional papers were more successful. The team stopped running ads in 2003 because word of mouth had become the most effective source of donors. By the end of 2005, 391 women had inquired about the program; after a 12-step screening process, 28 started hormone injections, and 23 completed the process. Eight of those 23 donated twice; three donated three times. The donations yielded 274 oocytes, at an average cost of \$3673 per egg. Factoring in the psychological and physical evaluations and the medical expenses, Kiessling says, the cost per woman of each completed donation cycle is \$27,200.

Very little of that money went to the donors. Women were reimbursed between \$560 and \$4004, depending on how many steps they completed. Although fertility clinics routinely compensate women for egg donation, some ethicists are wary of any

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payments that might encourage women to donate for money. Kiessling says donor programs need to have rigorous safeguards to prevent possible exploitation of donors, "but not paying isn't the answer." More crucial, she says, is keeping the medical team separate from the research team and developing a rigorous screening program that ensures women are making well-informed decisions. Kathy Hudson of the Johns Hopkins University Genetics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., agrees. Healthy volunteers are routinely paid for their participation in research projects, she says; "it seems just and fair that [oocyte donors] also be fairly compensated."



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Gretchen Vogel

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