

Vatican, biotech firm host congress to promote adult stem-cell therapy

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican will host an international congress to promote the use of adult stem cells as a safe, effective and ethical means to fight degenerative diseases.

The congress, to be held Nov. 9-11, will also feature speakers who support embryonic stem-cell research, to give proponents an opportunity to “explain the reasoning behind their position,” said Father Tomasz Trafny, an official with the Pontifical Council for Culture. The church is opposed to the use of embryonic stem cells since it involves the destruction of the human embryo.

The congress, organized by the Vatican’s councils for Culture and Health Care Ministry as well as the Pontifical Academy for Life, is being held in conjunction with the international biopharmaceutical company, NeoStem.

The congress will be the culture council and the biotech firm’s first major collaborative project since they forged an agreement in 2010 to work together to educate people about the benefits of adult stem-cell research. The collaboration is between NeoStem’s Stem for Life Foundation and the culture council’s foundation – called STOQ International, for Science, Theology and the Ontological Quest.

The interdisciplinary congress, “Adult Stem Cells: Science and the Future of Man and Culture,” will feature expert speakers from the fields of medicine, health and ethics.

Father Trafny said at a Vatican news conference June 16 that proponents of embryonic stem-cell research will have an “opportunity to defend their position” and give their reasons for pursuing a field that is not only unethical, but has not yet produced any concrete benefits.

He said some governments may be investing money in embryonic rather than adult stem-cell research because most government officials making these decisions are not medical experts and are influenced by others to choose which path to take.

That is why it is important to increase people's understanding about the concrete beneficial results coming out of adult stem-cell therapies, he added.

That is also why the target audience for the congress will be people "who do not have a real scientific background" such as policymakers, lawyers, government representatives, bishops and journalists.