The use of stem cells in research and therapies: Ethical, legal and social issues

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Ethical, legal and social issues associated with health research in general are multiple and complex. The complexity increases when research involves human tissues, and in particular stem cells as the trajectory of the latter will include scientific and technological advances not previously explored.

In April 2013 the South African Medical Research Council published a request for applications (RFA) for a new funding opportunity called the University Flagship Awards. These Awards are the largest medical research grants awarded by the MRC. After an initial internal selection process in the country's universities and science councils, a rigorous external review process of the selected applications was undertaken. One of the successful applicants was Prof. Michael Pepper (guest editor of this issue), at the University of Pretoria. Utilising a multidisciplinary approach, from pure scientific to clinical, ethico-regulatory and social aspects, his proposal was centred on stem cells. Accomplished scientists from diverse disciplines both in South Africa and abroad are involved in this project, which aims to contribute to the alleviation of the heavy burden of disease in South Africa through the translation of high-quality, high-impact research findings into practice and policy.

This issue is specific to the ethical, legal and social issues that arise in the context of stem cell research and therapies. Articles span not only the South African setting, but also the wider global situation. First authors of all the papers published in this issue, except for ‘Informed consent in clinical trials using stem cells: Suggestions and points of attention from informed consent training workshops in Japan’, are investigators in the Flagship Award. The issue, and most of the research published in this supplement, is the result of funding provided by the Medical Research Council of South Africa in terms of the MRC’s Flagships Awards Project SAMRC-RFA-UFSP-01-2013/STEM CELLS.