

# Cell-ebrate Life, Language, and Lawyers



An individual seeking his raison d'être in the dizzying mysticism of science must sign an ineluctable agreement to forego English as his first language.

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ILLUSTRATION  
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Nobody stands more in awe of science than I. In fact, my support of science attains an almost lyrical pitch. Knuckling my forelock in obeisance, I bow to the superior intellects who have brought us pop-up toasters, automatic transmissions and wrinkle-erasing versions of botulism.

The problem with science is scientists. An individual seeking his raison d'être in the dizzying mysticism of science must sign an ineluctable agreement to forego English as his first language. This is only fair. Ordinary people without a scientific education involving the use of polysyllabic words might accidentally discover the process of vulcanization or exploit some green mold on old mozzarella as a cure for intractable diseases. Like kids concocting a new adult-proof language to supplant the Igpay Atinlay of their elders, scientists are obliged to invent an incomprehensible argot of their own.

That is why stem cell research has been glacial since 1906. Russian histologist Alexander Maksimov (1874-1928) coined

the term and postulated (guessed) the existence of haematopoietic stem cells. It is probably a good idea to confirm the reality of such a thing before setting out to become an expert on it. Once Wikipedia explained to researchers that a stem cell is "a special type of 'source' or 'starter' cell that has the ability to grow into adult tissue," the rush for research grants was on.

Stem cells may be able to repair or replace damaged tissue, reversing diseases and injuries, such as cancer, diabetes, premature hair loss and the indignities of gravitational droop. The requisite obfuscation involved in such matters glosses over that stem cells have no stems at all. Equipped like a Bing cherry, they would be easier to harvest.

California voters approved Proposition 71 in November of 2004. It would provide \$3 billion in state funds to research human embryonic stem cells. The proposition was couched in the usual opaque language of such documents, so we decided to go out

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on the street like Jay Leno to ascertain the average person's understanding of stem cells.

Us: Excuse me, sir, we're doing a survey on the use of stem cells. Are you familiar with the term?

Street person: Are you kidding me? Is this for the Letterman show? He's OK, but I think that band leader guy is overpaid.

Us: No, I'm sorry. We would just like to know if you have heard about stem cells?

Street person: I'm glad you asked. I just happen to work for a company that makes 'em. We can make anything you want up to 4-foot-long in any style. Got a big contract with the city right now for all the crosswalks. You can spray or brush, no problem.

Us: Uh ... I think what you mean is "stencils."

Street person: That's what I said. Is this *Candid Camera*?

California has no lock on vacuity. We are almost certain the \$3 billion will not be spent in vain, although teaching English as a first language would be a good second choice.

The proposed use of human embryos has resulted in ethically slow progress. Alien embryos were deemed acceptable provided they had humanoid characteristics and not those of inked and pierced rock star heritage. None have surfaced, possibly because pregnant aliens are not qualified for interplanetary travel or an embryo would be of high-school age before arriving.

The Chinese were able to avoid the controversy by fielding a pair of identical divers in the 2008 Olympic synchronized diving event. Judges, anticipating an appeal based on possible manipulation of human embryos, determined there was actually only one diver. Innovative video photography was credited for creating the illusion of two. Lin Yue and Huo Liang agreed, exchanged mutual high-fives and departed as one.

Recently, the human embryo stumbling block was bypassed by Japanese

researchers at the NIAIST, or National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology for short. Scientists there claim to have created stem cells similar to those of human embryos using the removed wisdom teeth of a 10-year-old girl! Team leader Hajime Ogushi told reporters the results of his work were significant in two ways: avoidance of ethical issues of stem cells and "because wisdom teeth are destined to be thrown away anyway."

Third molars until now had joined tonsils, deviated septums, useless hide from tummy tucks and angry gall bladders as nature's detritus. Think of it! Exodontists, oral surgeons and GPs with forceps are sitting on a gold mine of material destined to be thrown away. That's like discovering a way to scrape the diamond chips from used

burs and reprocessing them into flawless eight-carat jewelry for trophy girlfriends.

Ogushi stated, "Because extractions of wisdom teeth are commonly operated in dental clinics, we can expect a lot of donors of stem cells." Theoretically, people who give up their third molars in their youth could sock them away in the back of the freezer, retrieving them later in life when deterioration sets in.

Unfortunately, you, me, the man on the street and everybody else who isn't either a Japanese- or English-speaking scientist won't have a clue what's going on. The demystifying of stem cells is best not left to scientists. The explanation should be granted to professionals in expository simplification of language, terms and solutions, e.g., lawyers. ■■■■

