

Parallel Session 23: What are we talking about when saying “public dialogue”?

EXHIBITION TO PROMOTE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN INFORMED SOCIAL DEBATE ON THE USE OF EMBRYOS

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Abstract

The use of embryos in research opens up an array of therapeutic applications and generates intense social debate on the ethical and legal issues involved. Congresses held on the use of stem cells often highlight the need to establish social dialogue; however, there are few mechanisms available with which to facilitate this interaction.

This project arose in response to a lack of communication channels to encourage informed social debate. In this regard, an exhibition named “Embryos and Medicine in the 21st Century” was designed in a format that is both interactive and easy to understand, covering the ethical and scientific issues related to this question and the opinions of distinct sectors of society.

Through several interactive tools, this exhibition aimed to encourage the general public to participate in the debate on the use of embryos for obtaining stem cells.

An evaluation was performed while this exhibition was held in the UB, where it received 2,700 visitors. The evaluation showed that approximately 80% of the visitors who expressed an opinion defended the use of embryonic stem cells for research purposes. These results were cited in *Science* (Vol. 299, February 2003).

Consequently, this project is a unique and innovative tool with which to establish true and informed dialogue with the public. The design of future communication initiatives aimed at stimulating public participation should consider the evaluation and the methodology used in this exhibition.

Key words: citizen participation, ethics, exhibition

Text

Context

The use of embryos in research opens up an array of therapeutic applications and generates intense social debate on the ethical and legal issues involved. Congresses held on the use of stem cells often highlight the need to establish social dialogue; however, there are few mechanisms available with which to facilitate this interaction.

This project arose in response to a lack of communication channels to encourage informed social debate, which was perceived when the Observatory on Bioethics and Law (OBD) of the University of Barcelona (UB) published their Document on Research with Human Embryos.

Objectives and methodology

In this regard, an exhibition named “Embryos and Medicine in the 21st Century” was designed with the scientific assessment of Maria Casado, director of the OBD, and Josep Egozcue, professor of cell biology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. This exhibition aimed to encourage the general public to participate in the debate on the use of embryos for obtaining stem cells.

Balanced information

To facilitate debate with an informed background, the exhibition shows, in a format that is both interactive and easy to understand, the ethical and scientific issues related to this question. In response to public interest and the need to establish an unbiased communication channel, it presented the most objective concepts while subjective information was provided by figures such as scientists and politicians (see Figure 1). In addition, the exhibition presented opinions in favour and against research with embryos, expressed by distinct sectors of society (see Figure 2). Also, proportional information was given on stem cells obtained from distinct sources, and the advantages and disadvantages of each source were described.

Encouraging public participation

The last area of the exhibition was devoted to reflection and recorded the opinions expressed by visitors. For this two mechanisms were designed. The first consisted of two tubes where the visitor could read: “Which has most weight?”. On one it said “The ethical issues derived from the use of embryos” and on the other “The possibility to develop new therapies”. Visitors were requested to place a ball into the cylinder that best reflected their opinion, and they could also observe the opinions expressed by others (see Figure 3).

Finally, the second mechanism was through virtual discussion forums in which the public could state their position in more depth. These opinions were shown periodically on the exhibition website (www.pcb.ub.es/expoembrions).

Results

An evaluation was performed while this exhibition was held in the UB, where it received 2,700 visitors. It showed that approximately 80% of the visitors who expressed an opinion defended the use of embryonic stem cells for research. These results were cited in Science.

Conclusions

Consequently, this project is a unique and innovative tool with which to establish true and informed dialogue with the public. The design of future communication initiatives aimed at stimulating public participation should consider the evaluation and the methodology used in this exhibition.

References:

Casado, M., Egozcue, J., et al., (2002). Document on Research with Human Embryos. Observatory on Bioethics and Law of the University of Barcelona.

Bosch, X (2003). Spaniards go for stem cells. Science (Vol. 299, 14 Feb, p. 1009).

Figures

Figure 1: Panel explaining that adults can be a source of stem cells. The researcher specialised in stem cells, Catherine Verfaillie, is shown giving her opinion. She states that although adult stem cells appear to be more promising than originally thought, research with other sources should be performed.



Figure 2: Interactive panel in which scientists, politicians, actors, people of distinct creeds, etc express their opinion on the topic.



Figure 3: Interactive panel through which visitors can express their opinion by dropping a ball into one of two transparent tubes and the opinion of other visitors can be observed.



