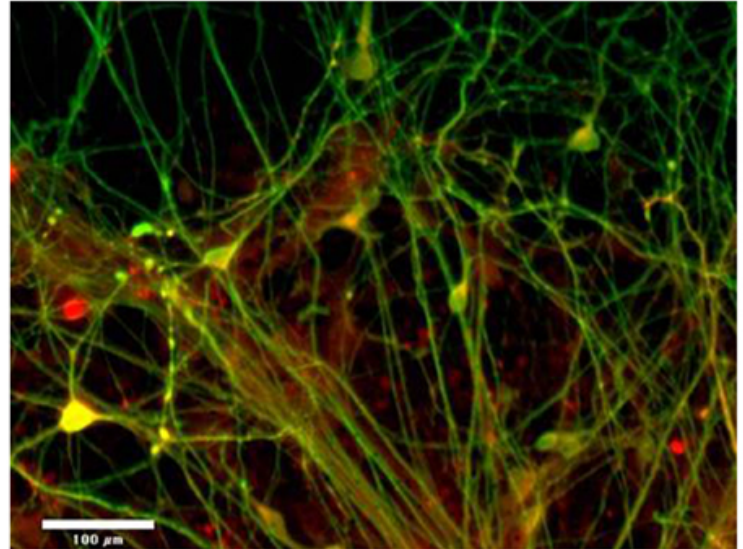


Embryonic stem cell research: an ethical dilemma

What are the issues being discussed?

Research with embryonic stem cells (ESCs) is highly debated and many people have strong opinions about it. Both sides of the debate are interested in protecting human life, so why are views so different? It comes down to how the human blastula is viewed.

ESCs are primarily made from cells found in a human blastula, one of the earliest stages of human life. A fertilised egg grows into a blastula (made of ~100 cells), which can only survive for a short time before it must be implanted in a womb. Blastulas used in research are typically made artificially in a laboratory or fertility clinic.



Neurons (nerve cells) made in the lab from human embryonic stem cells.

Photo: Oliver Brüstle, Institute of Reconstructive Neurobiology, University of Bonn Medical Center

What is the rationale for different opinions?

Some people see destroying a blastula for its cells as destroying an unborn child.

Others feel that a blastula is not exactly a child just yet, because unless a blastula is imbedded in the uterus wall, it will never have the chance to develop into a baby.

Every year fertility clinics create many blastula that are destroyed because they are made in surplus. Supporters of ESC research generally feel that using cells from these surplus blastula for research and developing medical treatments, which could help improve and save people's lives, is much better than throwing them away.

Where does the middle ground lie?

This is where discussion is important. Debates and discussions about the moral and ethical views of ESCs help establish the rules and regulations that govern scientific research and the development of medical treatments using stem cells.

It is important to realise that, although people may have very strong opinions on what is 'best' for society, groups on both sides of this discussion are interested in helping and protecting human lives. Understanding this can greatly help people to respect each other's differences in opinions and work to find the middle ground.