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Media Release

Australian Stem Cell Centre Publishes Patient Handbook

Overseas Stem Cell Therapies – Are they safe and how do you know?

10 December, 2009, Melbourne Australia:

The Australian Stem Cell Centre (ASCC) today published its Patient Handbook. The marketing of overseas stem cell therapies via the internet has been around for some years but there is increasing interest from Australians in accessing these therapies. Often clinics use the testimonials of patients as a marketing technique, hiding the fact that much of what they offer is not supported by clinical trials and is therefore untested. There is a clear need to assist the public in understanding what is involved and to guide individuals on how to fully investigate treatment options before travelling or participating.

The Patient Handbook is designed to help individuals understand what stem cells are, which stem cell treatments are considered safe and effective by specialists, which are considered experimental and which are unproven and the safety of the treatment is unknown. The Handbook does not seek to advise patients, evaluate individual treatments, or comment on an individual's reasons for travelling for treatment, but aims to provide the patient with the necessary information prior to considering any therapy.

Australia has a well regulated health system and patients can be confident that when stem cell treatments are offered here they will be both safe and effective. However, not every country is so well regulated. The promise that stem cell based treatments hold for debilitating diseases and crippling injuries, that are often otherwise untreatable, has led to treatments being offered in some countries without proof of safety and efficacy by properly overseen trials and regulation of the treatments. These processes are time consuming and expensive, but are essential for patient safety and well being.

It is in this environment that the ASCC has released its Patient Handbook with the aim of helping patients, their carers and family navigate their way through the myriad of treatments being offered.

Clinical Advisor for the Australian Stem Cell Centre, Dr Kirsten Herbert commented "Stem cell therapy holds great promise and clinical trials are ongoing under controlled circumstances. However, until the appropriate testing and regulation is in place for these international treatments, we need to proceed with the appropriate level of caution to avoid unforeseen complications that may harm patients."

The ASCC receives many enquiries about the status of stem cell research, clinical trials and therapies in Australia and overseas. Stem cell science continues to offer much promise for the treatment of a wide range of conditions. Australian and international stem cell research is progressing at a rapid pace, with some research quickly moving towards clinical trials.

Current clinical trials use adult stem cells, such as those conducted by the leading Australian stem cell company Mesoblast Limited. Mesoblast and its United States-based associate company, Angioblast Systems, are conducting eight clinical trials worldwide for indications ranging from osteoarthritis and intervertebral disc disease to congestive heart failure and expansion of cord blood for bone marrow transplants. A recently announced ASCC funded clinical trial is also about to begin at the University of New South Wales using corneal stem cells to treat blindness. Whilst the research progresses and many

stem cell treatments are in or nearing clinical trials, the only treatments currently fully proven and established are those for blood and related disorders such as leukaemia.

Mike Wilson, CEO of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation says “It is understandable that people living with chronic illness look actively at all possible medical therapies but it is of vital importance that people understand exactly what the risks and costs may be before making a decision.”

“Our advice is to address all of the questions listed in this excellent handbook and consult your own medical specialist before considering any form of stem cell therapy.”

The Patient Handbook can be found on the ASCC’s website or by contacting the Centre.

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About the ASCC

The Australian Stem Cell Centre was founded to capitalise on Australia’s significant strengths in the field of stem cell research. The ASCC was selected in 2002, in a competitive bid process, as Australia’s Biotechnology Centre of Excellence, an initiative of the Australian Government. The Centre provides a unique national resource for stem cell researchers to deliver outcomes that benefit the wider Australian biotechnology industry and will ultimately contribute innovative solutions to human health challenges.

The Centre was established with the financial and in-kind support of a number of institutions of which the current voting Members, who retain ultimate oversight of the Centre, are: Monash University, University of Queensland, Howard Florey Institute and University of Adelaide. The additional Stakeholder institutes are: University of Melbourne, Baker IDI, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute and Mater Medical Research Institute.

The ASCC is governed by a Board of Directors with independent scientific oversight and support from an eminent Scientific Advisory Board.

Total funding of \$100 million has been awarded to the ASCC by the Australian Government and is administered by the Australian Research Council and the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. The funding is provided in instalments from 2002 to 2011. To complement Australian Government funding, the State Government of Victoria’s Science Technology and Innovation program awarded the Australian Stem Cell Centre a further \$11 million to support key infrastructure in Victoria.

Together the ASCC and partnering organisations support a critical mass of Australian stem cell research that is internationally competitive. The ASCC currently funds research at leading institutes and universities in Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales with the major hubs of activity centred in Victoria and Queensland.