Question for written answer P-002927/2012
to the Commission
Rule 117
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Subject: European research on human embryonic stem cells for treating blindness

Pigmentary retinopathy is the most common genetic eye disease; it affects almost 400 000 people in Europe. The prevalence of pigmentary retinopathy is estimated at between one in 3000 and one in 5000.

Although there is currently no treatment to cure pigmentary retinopathy, as is now the case for cataracts, promising results were obtained during tests carried out on two visually impaired patients in the I-stem unit of the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research (Inserm). This clinical trial consisted of injecting 50 000 pigment epithelium cells from human embryonic stem cells (HESC) into the retina. This research, which will soon be the subject of a similar study in the United Kingdom, was of course greeted with enthusiasm by patient organisations on European Rare Disease Day on 29 February 2012.

This promising breakthrough shows once again the benefit of research on stem cells in all their forms, when carried out for therapeutic uses.

What is the Commission's opinion on this matter? Does it intend to strictly apply the case-law of the Court of Justice of the European Union which, in its decision of 18 October 2011, banned all types of patents on processes involving the removal of stem cells from human embryos? Or is it considering another form of legal protection for this type of innovative research to treat neurological diseases or blindness.

Is the Commission prepared, as part of the forthcoming negotiations on the 8th Research Framework Programme (2014-2020), to authorise EU public funding for research on human embryonic stem cells for therapeutic use?