

Vatican, biotech firm host adult stem cell meeting

November 9 2011, By NICOLE WINFIELD , Associated Press

(AP) -- The Vatican has entered into an unusual partnership with a small U.S. biotech company to promote using adult stem cells for treating disease, rather than focusing research on embryonic stem cells.

The Vatican's culture office and NeoStem Inc., on Tuesday provided details for this week's conference at the Vatican on [adult stem cells](#), which will draw scientists, patients, biotech CEOs and cardinals together.

Church teaching holds that life begins at conception. As a result, the Vatican opposes [embryonic stem cell research](#) because embryos are destroyed in the process.

The conference and partnership with New York-based NeoStem is part of the Vatican's recent \$1 million, five-year initiative to promote adult stem cell therapies and research, and in the process shift popular attention away from embryonic research.

Transplants of adult stem cells have become a standard lifesaving therapy for people with leukemia, lymphoma and other [blood diseases](#); and they are being studied in people who suffer from multiple sclerosis, heart attacks and diabetes. The more controversial [embryonic cells](#) may be used someday to grow replacement tissue for diseases like Parkinson's or diabetes, but that is a future prospect.

Many scientists believe the more flexible embryonic cells have more

promise, but lots of work is under way with both kinds.

It was former U.S. President George W. Bush's decision in 2001 to allow only restricted federal financing for researching [embryonic stem cells](#) that sparked much of the controversy over the technology that continues today.

Bush's [health secretary](#), Tommy Thompson, is a panelist at the conference and told reporters Tuesday that science had moved beyond destroying embryos.

"Why destroy an embryo?" Thompson asked. "We are in a new science of adult stem cells that are pluripotent," or able to differentiate into other tissues.

Another speaker at the conference starting Wednesday is Sharon Porter, who was diagnosed with systemic scleroderma, a chronic connective tissue disorder that leads to a hardening of the skin and internal organs.

There is no cure, but three years ago she underwent a treatment to reboot her immune system: Adult stem cells were removed from her body, her immune system was destroyed and the stem cells were re-injected to build a new immune system.

"It changed my life," Porter told reporters. "It brought me back to where I was before I was diagnosed."

Vatican officials acknowledged the unusual nature of the partnership between the Roman Catholic Church and a publicly-traded, for-profit biotech company.

But the Rev. Tomasz Trafny, head of the science department in the Vatican's culture office, said NeoStem's research and mission

corresponded with the Vatican's concerns to both promote research exclusively on adult stem cells, and broaden understanding about its uses to the wider public.

"It's not just an event but an itinerary of projects," he said of the collaboration.

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