

Stem cells: the story behind the headlines

Stem cells. Controversy at the frontiers of science. Elizabeth Finkel. Sydney: ABC Books, 2005 (vi + 282 pp, \$27.95). ISBN 0 7333 1248 9.

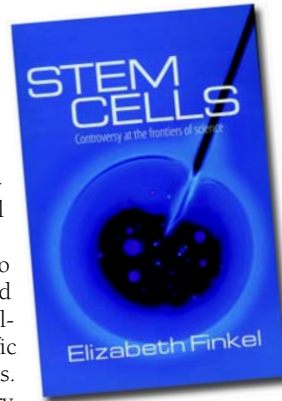
THERE HAS BEEN NO MORE controversial area in medical science in recent years than the discovery that embryonic and adult stem cells have the potential to generate a range of different tissues, possibly even organ repair and regeneration. As the field has evolved at a blistering pace, several important strands can be discerned.

Firstly, the science, while complex, is of great interest to the lay reader. For the public to adequately understand and appraise the importance and potential of these new developments, it is crucial that the current state of scientific development be explained in readily understandable terms.

Secondly, the area of stem cell therapy, especially embryonic stem cells and their development, raises many complex ethical issues divisive in our society.

Thirdly, Australian scientists have played a major role both in the development of in-vitro fertilisation, the precursor to the embryonic stem cell age, and in the development of embryonic and adult stem cells as potential treatments of the future.

Elizabeth Finkel, a distinguished science journalist with a strong background in embryology, has written an intriguing account of the stem cell story. She has brought together all three strands into a very readable account of the field. On one level, for those interested in human stories in science, this is a very good read with great human achievement and political drama. It is also one of the best accounts of the scientific achievements with stem cells to date and of the basis for arising ethical issues.



Finkel makes no secret that she is an enthusiast for developing stem cell science as a viable treatment, with both embryonic and adult stem cell research. In some of the examples she covers, most notably Parkinson's disease, she may overstate the current state of success of stem cell therapies just a little, but does so in an attempt to give a balanced story. One of her key conclusions, that scientific facts must be presented and discussed dispassionately, and that ethical considerations and viewpoints should not be allowed to bias interpretation and presentation of the science to the general public, is a pivotal one in all aspects of science.

Stem cell therapy, whether derived from embryonic or adult stem cells, has a great way to go before we will know for sure whether it will be a viable treatment in a major sense for human illness. Elizabeth Finkel's book makes clear that it is an area of very considerable promise, and I commend this riveting account to all who have an interest in the area.

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Competing interests: Professor Byrne is the current Dean of Medicine at Monash University, where much of the stem cell work in this book was carried out.

"Stem cells" won the Science Writer's Award in the 2005 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards