

Italy reports stem-cell achievement

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Italian scientists say the stem cells they extracted from "virgin birth" embryos are capable of turning into neurons.

The University of Milan researchers said the embryos were produced by a process called parthenogenesis, which allows eggs to develop without being fertilized.

The technique might allow embryonic stem cells to be produced without having to destroy an early stage human embryo made by fertilizing eggs with sperm, the Brisbane (Australia) Herald Sun reported.

Human "parthenotes" -- embryos made by parthenogenesis -- normally never develop beyond a few days. But the Italian researchers created parthenotes that divided and formed immature embryos called blastocysts, New Scientist magazine reported. They subsequently obtained stem cells from the embryos and grew them in the laboratory, demonstrating the cells can differentiate into mature neurons.

Monash University stem-cell expert Dr. Alan Trounson told the Herald Sun: "This is the first example I have seen of this in humans, and it is potentially very exciting. It could be a source of embryonic stem cells that's not embryonic in the conventional sense."

The findings were presented last week in the Czech Republic, during the annual meeting of the European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology.

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