

Data doesn't back websites' stem-cell claims, says researcher

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Stem-cell therapy is an exciting and promising field, but the director of the Health Law Institute at the University of Alberta, Tim Caulfield, wants people to be aware that these treatments aren't ready.

Caulfield led a study looking at 19 websites that offer stem-cell therapies, offering treatments for anything from aging to cures for liver problems, cancer and Parkinson's disease. Caulfield's study came out in the December issue of Cell Stem Cell alongside a report from the International Society for Stem Cell Research. He wanted to gain a better understanding of this "stem-cell tourism" industry by asking an important question: are these sites explaining the risks, benefits and limitations to patients? Caulfield can answer that with one word: no.

"They over-emphasize benefits, minimize the risk and to [researchers'] eyes, the claimed therapeutic benefits do not match what exists in the scientific literature," said Caulfield. "If people really are benefitting from this, let's see the data, let's see the studies.

"They use anecdotes; they use professional testimonials, but we want data."

These results are heartbreaking to Caulfield because people are forking out a lot of money for these unproven therapies. The average cost is almost \$22,000 per treatment.

"People are spending their life savings trying to access the therapeutics that just aren't ready for prime time," said Caulfield. "Often these websites' therapies are targeted or marketed to people with very serious diseases. This is a population that is very vulnerable."

Caulfield admits, though, that it would be easy to believe what these websites are telling them.

"They are very convincing; they look tremendously legitimate," said Caulfield. "The cliché is true. If it looks too good to be true, it probably is."

Provided by University of Alberta

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