

Clinic websites mislead about stem cell therapies

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Continuing advances in stem cell research has added to the expectation of these cells becoming a common form of therapy used in the clinic. However, society demands scientific proof before an experimental therapy is used on humans. While this proof is accumulating, many voices obfuscate or exaggerate. This is a particular problem on the web, where language is not regulated and may persuade patients to select a treatment that is not scientifically proven.

An official investigation by the Japanese government in 2015 found a noteworthy increase in the number of patients requesting cosmetic medical treatments and attributed this rise to information distributed on the providers' websites. In response, Japan amended a law regarding the regulation of medical advertising. The law adds greater responsibility to clinics or hospitals that offer cell therapies for the information they disseminate on their website. The question is how effective are these new measures in terms of providing accurate information for a patient to make an educated decision about the treatment?

The responsibility of the provider with regards to the information given to a patient has been

ambiguous in Japan. A law passed four years ago requires providers make public the documents shown to the patients in the clinic about the therapy before informed consent is received. These documents can be found on Japanese ministry websites and describe the potential therapeutic effects of the therapy along with the side effects and other possible risks. It is quite obvious that the details provided in these forms are more elaborate than the details clinics make available on their websites. In this scenario, patients may have already convinced themselves to select the therapy and will be unpersuaded by any information at the final stages such as the signing of the consent forms no matter how discouraging the new information is. It is hoped that the availability of these documents will help patients make informed decisions.

At CiRA, researchers at the Uehiro Research Division for iPS Cell Ethics is studying the effects of the most recent laws on medical advertising. Our goal is not only to evaluate these laws, but to also provide recommendations for their amendment, so that patients are better informed when making decisions about scientifically proven or unproven treatments.



Taichi Hatta at a public speaking