

Eye stem cell treatment is given approval

By Sarah Knapton, Science Editor

THE first stem cell therapy has been approved by European regulators, in a major step forward for advanced medicine in Britain.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) has endorsed Holoclar, a treatment in which a patient's healthy stem cells are used to grow new cells, which are then transplanted into the eye.

Experts predicted such advanced treatments will be available on the NHS within a few years. Until now, stem cell therapies have been confined to the laboratory and clinical trials.

"This is exciting, both because there are no other treatments for this sort of damage to the eye and because this is the first example in which a 'medicine' based on stem cells has been approved for use in humans," said Prof Graham McGeown, of the Centre for Experimental Medicine, Queen's University Belfast.

"Because the cells come from the patient themselves, there should be no worries that the body will reject them, as can happen when using a transplant from another person."

Stem cells can act as a repair system for the body. Limbal stem cells are located at the border between the cornea and the white of the eye. The treatment takes a sample of the patient's healthy cornea, removes the stem cells and grows them until there are sufficient numbers to put back into the eye. The cells themselves then repair the damage. Moorfields Eye Hospital in London has successfully treated around 20 people so far in trials.

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