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people's initiative "For one car-free Sunday per season - a 4-year trial" is regarded as difficult to implement; parliament has drafted new laws in response to the initiatives "Yes to fair rents" and "For adequate vocational training", which provide solutions to the problems addressed by both proposals.

Pablo Crivelli 

Translated from German.

## "Keep health insurance costs down"

The people's initiative "Keep health insurance costs down" was launched in February 2002 by the non-party-political Association of Health Insurance Members and Carers (Rassemblement des Assurés et des Soignants – RAS) with the aim of "protecting Swiss citizens against the continually rising cost of health insurance premiums".

The initiative calls for premiums to be defined on the basis of the actual medical costs incurred during the previous financial year. These must be verified by an authorised supervisory organ. Added to this, the initiative proposes setting up an independent body to monitor health insurance company reserves and ensure appropriate mechanisms to hedge against real risks. The aim is to encourage competition among the various health insurers. The initiative also calls for health insurance companies to adopt more transparent accounting practices and to clearly distinguish between the obligatory health insurance and other types of health insurance in their balance sheet and financial statements. BDK

# Human embryos for research

*Switzerland is to allow the use of stem cells from surplus human embryos for research purposes.*

At the end of a lengthy debate in the spring session of parliament, the Council of States voted by a clear majority (23 with a few abstentions) in favour of the law on research on stem cells from human embryos. Science is interested in this biological material because such cells are "immature", i.e. they have not yet developed the various tissues which make up the human body. Scientists are currently attempting to discover the mechanisms which turn identical cells taken from a days-old embryo into nerve or muscle cells. Once this process has been identified, the challenge lies in "forcing" the biological material to develop into a specialised tissue which could be used to repair damage resulting from heart attack or embolism, or develop drugs to treat degenerative diseases such as Parkinsons or Alzheimers.

Various speakers agreed that theoretical research is still in its infancy and the first applications are a few years off. In the view of centre-right members in particular, science and pharmaceutical companies in Switzerland have no intention of standing by and watching more liberal countries like the UK steal a march in this area. Appropriate legislation is therefore deemed essential. Before voting on the new law the Council of States

formulated a number of ethical and moral constraints and defined strict provisions under which stem cell research may be carried out.

### Imprisonment for infringement

Stem cells can only be extracted from surplus embryos which have been fertilised in vitro but are not required for a pregnancy and are therefore earmarked for disposal. Before research can begin, scientists must obtain the consent of the Federal Office of Public Health, the National Ethics Commission and the couple whose embryo is to be used. The law therefore prohibits the generation and commercialisation of human embryos exclusively for research purposes. To safeguard against misuse, penalties of up to five years imprisonment are laid down. The law now goes before the National Council for discussion and could come into force at the beginning of 2004.

Pablo Crivelli 

Translated from German.

## Federal Referendum

### 18 May 2003

- Revision of the Federal Law on the Army and Military Administration (Army XXI)
- Federal Law on the Protection of the Population and Civil Defence
- People's Initiative "Yes to fair rents"
- People's Initiative "for one car-free Sunday per season – a 4-year trial (Sunday Initiative)"
- People's Initiative "Healthcare must be affordable (Health Initiative)"
- People's Initiative "Equal rights for the disabled"
- People's Initiative "Non-nuclear energy – for an energy reform and the gradual decommissioning of nuclear power plants (non-nuclear energy)"
- People's Initiative "Moratorium Plus – for an extension of the moratorium on nuclear power plant construction and a reduction of the nuclear risk (MoratoriumPlus)"
- People's Initiative "for adequate vocational training (apprenticeship initiative)"

### Forthcoming referendum dates 2003

19 October / 30 November

## JOHN F. KENNEDY INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL GSTAAD, SWITZERLAND



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