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Stem-cell developments are not replacements

Amid all the hoopla over an exciting breakthrough in stem-cell research that uses skin cells instead of human embryos lies an important truth: The latest discovery should not replace research using embryonic stem cells.

The Bush White House and other politicians may pretend stunning studies in Japan and Wisconsin free them from their very uncomfortable, anti-science position on embryonic stem cells. They do not. Not yet, anyway.

Research should continue on both fronts — with a reasonable supply of stem cells in both areas of study. The latest development, whereby human skin cells are reprogrammed to behave like embryonic stem cells, should be plus — not in place of — work with embryonic stem cells.

The new research means there will be a larger supply of cell lines to work with but it is not clear whether these cells have enough of the versatile attributes of stem cells derived from embryos.

The possible benefits for treating a variety of illnesses outweigh the political and religious concerns that for too long have stymied research in the U.S.

President Bush has been at odds with most Americans who understand that his decision to limit research with embryonic stem cells is a political one — in direct conflict with science's need to advance.

It would be fantastic if new research ends the red-hot political debate. But there are still too many questions. The technique has been described by experts as still at a level of basic research.

Some politicians will see the new findings as an excuse not to have to worry about the more politically challenging use of embryonic stem cells. Presidential candidates in both parties should be pressed to say specifically how they view such federally funded research.

This should be a campaign issue. Bush has taught us that a president can stand in the way of practical scientific research.

The potential benefits for stem-cell research's impact on millions of lives are too important to let one avenue of research forestall or trump the other — or to let another president stand in the way of scientific progress.