



Embryonic stem cell debate is gray area

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Nothing is going to change an individual's moral position on the subject of embryonic stem cell research. However, many people haven't thought through their ideas on the subject, because it hasn't been necessary. It is a certainty, however, that it will become more of a public issue as time goes on.

There are a number of misconceptions.

For instance, did you know that the practice of embryonic stem cell research is legal in most of the United States? Some people may have the impression it was banned by President Bush's executive order in August 2001. That is not the case. The only thing curtailed at that time - and not prohibited - was federal funding of most - but not all - embryonic stem cell research.

"Embryonic stem cell research is perfectly legal," states a fact sheet from the National Pro-Life Action Center based in Washington, D.C. "In fact, President Bush was the first president to authorize federal funding for this research, and there is no cap on the amount of funding the government is already providing for embryonic stem cell lines developed prior to August 2001."

"There are virtually no restrictions on the kind of stem-cell research that may be done in this country," according to Joe Palca, science correspondent for National Public Radio. "The federal restrictions are on the use of federal dollars for embryonic stem cell research. With private money, scientists can do practically anything they want."

But this is not the case in Michigan and five other states. Michigan banned research on live fetuses and embryos in 1978.

Legislation to lift that ban has been introduced in the Michigan House by Rep. Andrew Meisner, a Ferndale Democrat. However, the measure would only allow research on embryos unneeded or unsuitable for implantation. Meisner said there are some 400,000 frozen embryos in storage in fertility clinics around the country. His legislation would allow donors the choice of having them used for embryonic stem cell research. The bill would prohibit donors from receiving any financial or other benefit from the donation.

So basically, we are talking about embryos that would be otherwise discarded, or killed, if you prefer that description.

Related proposals by state Rep. Mark Meadows, D-East Lansing, would increase penalties for those who attempt human reproductive cloning.

Misunderstanding of embryonic stem cell research has impeded rational discussion of the subject.

For one thing, just what is a stem cell?

Stem cells are a type of cell that can generate many different kinds of mature cells, according to the Southfield-based Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures.

"These cells are the foundation or building blocks of all tissue in the body," states the group's Web site www.StemCellResearchforMichigan.com. "As such they hold the promise of being the body's own essential repair tool. Embryonic stem cells (ESCs) can form any type of cell in the body. In contrast, adult/tissue stem cells are partially specialized and generally only form cells from their tissue of origin. So, blood-forming stem cells can form all types of blood cells, while skin stem cells can form new skin cells."

The latter is really a critical point in the debate, since many embryonic stem cell opponents say scientists can achieve what they want by using adult stem cells. Adult stem cells, however, are differentiated cells while the key point about embryonic stem cells is that they are undifferentiated. The theory is that undifferentiated cells could substitute for disease- or defect-causing, irregular cell growth, thus alleviating many heretofore incurable situations.

According to MCSCRC, "embryonic stem cells are extremely valuable to researchers because they can reproduce themselves apparently indefinitely and become any one of the roughly 200 kinds of cells in the human body. Scientists isolate the inner cell mass from a blastocyst five days after fertilization and grow these cells in the laboratory to develop embryonic stem cell lines."

Many people may not realize that the cells for research must come from five-day-old embryos, and not from those any older.

But the embryo is destroyed in the process, which has prompted opposition from abortion foes. The Catholic Church is adamantly opposed to the practice.

Catholics have a "duty to condemn the particular gravity of the voluntary destruction of human embryos obtained 'in vitro' for the sole purpose of research," states a 1987 church document entitled "The Gift of Life." ("In vitro" refers to the mixing of eggs with sperm in a laboratory dish in order to achieve conception.)

Conservative Protestants also oppose embryonic stem cell research, but there is some theological support for the process.

Ian Barbour, a Templeton Prize winner and author of "When Science Meets Religion," contends that "With a new technology, it may be easier to forbid everything or to forbid nothing than to make and enforce careful judgments about potential uses."

"A more nuanced position is always more demanding in the discernment it requires; it also places a heavier responsibility on those who espouse it because of the risks involved," stated theologian Paul Jersild, writing in the Journal of Lutheran Ethics. "I would avoid the two opposite poles in the ESC research: the embryo is not a human being with the same moral weight and status as human subjects living in society, but neither is it a mere collection of cells without any moral claim on society. The one viable alternative to these positions is ... driven by the possibilities of healing and adamantly committed to protecting the procedure from every form of self-serving misuse. The end result should be, and I believe can be, the serving of the common good of society."

The potential benefits to human life of embryonic stem cell research are substantial. No matter which side you take in the dispute, there is a particular moral responsibility that is shouldered.

Is it possible or consistent to approve of lifting the ban on such research in Michigan while still personally opposing the practice or taxpayer funding for it?

Ultimately, the people of Michigan will decide this issue.

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