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REVIEW & OUTLOOK**Splitting Stem Cells**

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Politics always trails the rush of science, especially on matters of moral import. So we'd like to break type and praise this week's Senate debate over federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research. Congress is finally drawing some policy lines and working toward a social consensus rather than abandoning the ethics to an unelected scientific elite.

Supporters of unlimited taxpayer support are upset that President Bush cast his first veto on a bill that would have lifted his 2001 restrictions on federal funding. Under those rules, federal cash (some \$90 million) has flowed to embryonic stem-cell lines that existed as of that date, but no taxpayer money supports research that would destroy new embryos.

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To many scientists and Democrats, this issue can be distilled to a choice between America's leading the world in medical

progress, or lapsing into Luddite religiosity. Their pressure inspired 63 Senators, including 19 Republicans, to oppose Mr. Bush and support more federal funding. Yet as the President's veto -- and Congress's failure to override -- shows, many Americans disagree and are troubled by what they believe is the destruction of an early stage of human life.

Our own view is that the embryos from which stem cells are collected have the potential to be -- but are not yet -- human beings. This is the dominant view across U.S. society, which is one reason there is little controversy over fertility treatments, in which embryos are routinely created and discarded. Private stem-cell research on these discarded embryos remains legal, and, contrary to much political spin, private funding is plentiful.

No less than 11 private stem-cell research centers exist across the country; Harvard alone employs more than 100 researchers and has 17 new stem-cell lines. More than 60 U.S. and international companies are pursuing stem-cell research -- from such giants as Johnson & Johnson to start-ups. In 2005, the

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venture-capital industry put more than \$102 million into the stem-cell industry. All of this casts doubt on the claim that America is "losing" quality researchers to other countries for lack of funding.

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The main political rub concerns taxpayer funding, and several states (such as Connecticut and Illinois) have already decided to allow it. California, as usual, is spending the most at \$3 billion.

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But Mr. Bush is hardly taking some extremist point of view in opposing it. At least the Hyde Amendment passed in 1976, a similar compromise has prevailed on abortion legal, but taxpayers aren't obliged to pay for a practice they find morally objectionable. The European Union is currently having its own debate over whether to allow public funding of embryonic research, with those member states opposed to government involvement winning that battle.

Especially at the start of this brave new world of genetic research involving human embryos, caution may be wise. As Mr. Bush put it in his veto statement: "If this bill were to become law, American taxpayers for the first time in our history would be compelled to fund the destruction of human embryos." Whether or not you agree with Mr. Bush's moral judgment about embryos, you can't deny that he's representing a significant chunk of American opinion.

Lost amid the veto politics this week was the fact that Congress also moved in other areas of ethics and medical research. Mr. Bush signed a bill passed unanimously by the House and the Senate that outlawed "fetal farming," or the practice of raising and aborting fetuses for research. The Senate also passed legislation that would have encouraged greater research into exploiting the stem cells scientists need without destroying embryos, as well as research into adult stem cells. That bill failed in the House, mainly because Democrats think the issue of stem cells is a political issue against Republicans this fall.

There are other issues that Congress could usefully address in the months ahead. The House hasn't passed a ban on human cloning, a practice that the public widely opposes and that dozens of countries (and even the U.N.) have already outlawed. And a California lawsuit recently filed legal challenges to patent protections on embryonic stem-cell research, a reminder that issues of intellectual property and trade secrets in medical research are as contentious and unsettled. Only this week, a story in the Journal pointed to patent law as a bigger factor than money in driving stem-cell research out of the U.S.

This week's partisan jockeying aside, the good news is that politicians have begun to address these profound moral questions. Yes, politicians will sometimes succumb to cheap political distortion, but given enough time and information the public can usually understand the stakes.

In any case, we'd rather have a messy political brawl than leave such matters to either the media or the judiciary to settle. As we've seen with global warming and other issues, scientists can also be motivated by self-interest and partisanship. The louder and longer the political debate, the better informed the public will be. Come to think of it, maybe we should have more such veto fights.


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