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Untie the Hand

It's time for the president to revise his stem cell policy.

PRESIDENT BUSH has few allies left in the stem cell debate. The mainstream of his party deserted him last year when the Republican-controlled Congress went on record opposing Mr. Bush's position on the issue. And just this week, even the president's chief of medical research criticized the administration's harmful restrictions on federal funds before a Senate subcommittee. With popular stem cell legislation all but assured to pass this year in the Democratic Congress, perhaps Mr. Bush should reconsider his position.

Elias A. Zerhouni, head of the federal National Institutes of Health and a 2002 Bush appointee, thinks so. In response to questions on human embryonic stem cells, undifferentiated cells extracted from embryos that promise to assist in curing numerous chronic and deadly diseases, Dr. Zerhouni said, "From my standpoint, it is clear today that American science will be better served, and the nation will be better served, if we let our scientists have access to more stem cell lines." Under Mr. Bush's policy, researchers can use federal money to study only the 21 viable embryonic stem cell lines that existed before he drafted his rules. But Dr. Zerhouni said genetic instability made these lines insufficient for continued research.

Critics are right that there are other types of stem cells that might one day prove useful in fighting human disease. But as the field of stem cell research develops, it is not wise to bet that American scientists will be able to make large breakthroughs using only non-embryonic stem cells, which show less potential. Indeed, Dr. Zerhouni insisted that studies showing stem cells taken from adults to be just as promising as embryonic stem cells "do not hold scientific water." He also said: "It is important for us not to fight with one hand tied behind our back." Meanwhile, other countries without such restrictions stand to lead the advance of next-generation biomedical research.

A huge majority of Americans, Congress and even Mr. Bush's NIH director have considered the implications of funding embryonic stem cell research and concluded that extracting the cells from embryos set to be discarded anyway is not objectionable enough to deny funds. In January, the House passed a bill that would ease restrictions on stem cell research, and the legislation is on deck in the Senate. If it reaches Mr. Bush's desk, he should sign it. If he does not, Congress should override his veto.