

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

Promising debate

By Gary J. Andres

Published May 25, 2006

We seldom rely on politics or science to solve ethical dilemmas. In the modern age, the political process and technological progress multiply, not ameliorate, moral quandaries. Yet in the case of federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, the combination of the two may have created a pathway out of a thorny predicament.

Advertisement

Five years ago this August, President Bush announced a policy to fund some embryonic stem cell research, but also proposed new rules to address serious ethical concerns. The White House policy allowed federal funding on embryonic stem cell lines created before Aug. 9, 2001. As one presidential adviser told me, these lines were created without taxpayer incentive to destroy the embryos for their cells. Similarly, research on lines created after that date would not receive federal funding to avoid using taxpayer dollars to incentivize embryo destruction.

Vigorous debate over the policy continues five years later. Some scientists argue the limits imposed by Mr. Bush are too onerous and will slow the development of cures for terrible diseases. They contend embryonic stem cells hold the potential for reversing heart disease, diabetes, stroke and spinal cord injuries, possibly even a cure for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

And as Eric Cohen pointed out earlier this month in the *National Review*, some scientists maintain (erroneously according to Mr. Cohen) that America is even losing its competitive edge due to Mr. Bush's policy. Mr. Cohen cites a recent study by Jason Owen-Smith of the University of Michigan and Jennifer McCormick of Stanford that argues the president's policy has injured U.S. leadership in this field. He notes a press release that accompanied the scientists' article saying, "The fear that United States researchers might lose ground to their international counterparts in human embryonic stem cell research now appears to have become a fact."

But as Mr. Cohen and others maintain, the issue is more complex than how to maximize scientific freedom or American competitiveness. The debate is highly emotional and often pits ethics and compassion for unborn embryos against the goal of finding cures for fatal diseases.

In May of last year, the House passed legislation (238-194) to overturn the president's policy. The Senate is expected to consider similar legislation as early as next month. Knowledgeable Senate staffers tell me it's likely the Senate will also pass a bill to reverse Mr. Bush's policy -- possibly by a veto-proof margin. Yet last year's House vote was significant. While the House legislation passed easily, it was over 50 votes short of the 290 required to override a presidential veto. So at least for the next two-and-a-half years, Mr. Bush's policy will remain the law of the land.

As a result of these realities, some interesting new developments have unfolded. A growing body of research suggests it's possible to generate embryonic stem cells without creating or destroying new human embryos. As *The Washington Post's* Rick Weiss wrote in June, "the gathering consensus among

biologists is that embryonic stem cells are made, not born -- and that embryos are not an essential ingredient." Mr. Weiss reports that new research shows that ordinary body cells can be turned into the equivalent of embryonic stem cells.

Could this new line of research provide a way around the legitimate concerns raised on all sides of this debate? Some distinguished researchers and ethicists believe so. Last summer the President's Council on Bioethics reviewed a variety of these new approaches and found a great deal of promise. So intriguing is this new research, that two senators historically on opposite sides of the embryonic stem cell debate have come together and introduced legislation to provide more federal funding. Pennsylvania Sens. Rick Santorum (who opposes embryonic stem cell research) and Arlen Specter (a vocal supporter of it) recently introduced legislation to promote funding for this alternative stem cell research. Mr. Santorum says the new bill "reflects a commitment to curing disease, promoting scientific progress, and respect(s) life."

Mr. Bush deserves a great deal of credit for crafting a policy that balances concerns for scientific advancement and curing disease with the ethical concerns raised in the embryonic stem cell debate -- as do the lawmakers promoting this new research. Mr. Bush's decision made in the political arena and the response by the scientific community have led to initiatives like the Santorum-Specter legislation. While we rarely rely on politics or science to unlock ethical dilemmas, in this case they may be the key.

Copyright © 2006 News World Communications, Inc. All rights reserved.

[Return to the article](#)



[Want to use this article? Click here for options!](#)

Copyright The Washington Times .