

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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The Stem Cell Debate

Earlier this year, the House of Representatives passed legislation authorizing the federal government to fund research on new human embryonic stem cell lines. Senate advocates, emboldened by the public support of Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN), are pressing for adoption of a similar measure in the Senate. These advocates insist that embryonic stem cells hold the “best hope” for curing a plethora of human ailments. But President Bush has pledged to veto any bill that authorizes the use of “taxpayers’ money to promote science which destroys life in order to save life.” And so a battle line has been drawn.

Out of the fray, a few ambitious peacemakers have proposed an alternative approach—other sources of “embryonic-like” stem cells that do not require the destruction of the human embryo. Oddly enough, instead of welcoming the compromise, some embryonic stem cell advocates have criticized these proposals, calling them ethically suspect and scientifically speculative. The hypocrisy here borders on the absurd considering that these exact arguments have been leveled against embryonic stem cell research.

The alternative proposals were carefully reviewed by the president’s Council on Bioethics and have been incorporated into legislative initiatives on Capitol Hill. Their aim is to encourage researchers to explore the purported potential of embryonic stem cell research within appropriate moral constraints. The proposed alternatives have not yet been successful, and much work remains to prove that the methods do not, in fact, harm the human embryo. Nonetheless, the proposals represent a sincere attempt to reconcile opponents in a morally divisive area of public policy.

In dismissing these alternative proposals out of hand, staunch embryonic stem cell advocates are rejecting the role of the federal government in setting moral boundaries on scientific progress. Although their arguments often sound moral and sympathetic, their primary goal is securing government protection and funding for research free from moral constraint.

Nobel Laureate Paul Berg, one of the most vocal critics of these “alternative proposals,” recently stated that his “principal concern” is that “theological and ideological pronouncements” will become the standard for what is scientifically permissible. He goes so far as to argue that “the freedom to conduct scientific inquiry is inherent in the right to free speech granted in the Constitution’s Bill of Rights” (*San Francisco Business Times*, 5/9/05).

However, knowing that this vision of untrammelled science is not palatable to most Americans, the standard-bearers for scientific freedom have attacked these alternative proposals on other grounds. In a July 19 op-ed piece in *The Washington Post*, Berg and his colleagues argued that some of the alternative proposals raise “ethical concerns as to possible damage that might be inflicted on the embryo.” Yet these same authors have publicly supported the special creation and destruction of human embryos solely for research. In the op-ed they criticize the alternative proposals as “dubious,” “unproven,” and “speculative,” though the same can be said of their research. They argue that “there is no scientific evidence that [these stem cells] would be . . . safe for human therapies” when scientists have widely admitted that human embryonic stem cells form tumors and become genetically unstable.

Such blatant hypocrisy reveals a deliberate abdication of moral responsibility. As C. S. Lewis noted, “what we call Man’s power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.” Elected officials and scientists alike should reject utilitarianism, however disguised, and insist on debating complex bioethical issues in terms that are clear and honest, both morally and scientifically.

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