

EMBRYONIC STEM CELLS

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) tells us this about stem cells:

Stem cells have the remarkable potential to develop into many different cell types in the body. Serving as a sort of repair system for the body, they can theoretically divide without limit to replenish other cells as long as the person or animal is still alive. When a stem cell divides, each new cell has the potential to either remain a stem cell or become another type of cell with a more specialized function, such as a muscle cell, a red blood cell, or a brain cell.

In all the debate surrounding the topic of stem cell research, it must be remembered that there are different types of stem cells. Adult stem cells and neonatal stem cells (found in the used placenta and umbilical cord) can be obtained without doing the donor any harm. Embryonic stem cells, however, can only be obtained by killing the embryo. This is what makes embryonic stem cell research an ethical question.

The reason people who oppose abortion also oppose embryonic stem cell research is because extracting stem cells from embryos kills them. Embryonic stem cell lines cannot be established apart from dead embryos. Therefore, since embryos (just like fetuses and newborns and infants and adults) are human beings, embryonic stem cell research is unjust and unjustified. It is the killing of one person (actually many persons) in the theoretic attempt to save other people. Is it justifiable to kill one person in order to spare someone else from disease?

As to the potential benefit of embryonic stem cell research, it remains completely speculative. *The Coalition of Americans for Research Ethics* tells us that adult stem cells have been successfully used to treat 56 different diseases. Embryonic stem cells, which are prone to tumor formation, have yet to be successfully used in any single treatment. Add to this the potential long-term dangers that this kind of genetic engineering might incur, and it's not hard to see why even some "pro-choicers" fear the fallout of such medical practices.

Since President Bush's August 9, 2001 statement on embryonic stem cell research, the standard of federal funding for said practice is as follows, (obtained from the NIH website). Many private corporations are involved in funding research which does not meet these requirements.

Research on human embryonic stem cell lines may receive [federal] funding if the cell line meets the following criteria: removal of cells from the embryo must have been initiated before August 9, 2001, when the President outlined this policy; and the embryo from which the stem cell line was derived must no longer have had the possibility of developing further as a human being. The embryo must have been created for reproductive purposes but no longer be needed for them. Informed consent must have been obtained from the parent(s) for the donation of the embryo, and no financial inducements for donation are allowed.

Though there is much controversy, and an abundance of written debate surrounding this issue, it is really very simple. If human life begins at conception, and it does, then killing embryos so as to harvest their cells, even if it provides a benefit for someone else, is a sinister and bankrupt practice.

