Politics and the Debate Over Stem Cell Research

By ACSH Staff — September 22, 2004

The intensifying debate over stem cell research has become a political football.

On one hand, John Kerry portrays President Bush as the obstacle to new treatments for a range of diseases, including Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Senator Kerry would have us believe that if he is elected the United States will be catapulted to world leadership in stem cell research and produce an array of miracle cures.

On the other hand, the President and many of his supporters argue that the Bush administration was the first to provide funding for stem cell research. However, in the next breath, they argue that the prospects for cures are grossly overstated; federal funding is not needed; and besides, the real potential for finding cures lies not in embryonic stem cells (ESCs), but in applications of adult stem cells (ASCs).

Both sides are telling only part of the story, and inconsistencies and half-truths in these arguments abound:

-- Because ESCs are obtained via the destruction of early-stage embryos, the inflammatory language of the debate over abortion creeps into discussions, with references to "killing" and "tearing apart" human embryos, and "culling" their cells.

Far better for such critics of ESC research to say forthrightly: "I oppose this technology for religious and moral reasons" -- as is their right -- and skip the quasi-scientific rationalizations.

Yet these same individuals who claim that ESC research "kills potential babies" have never objected strongly to the fact that for decades, embryos have been created and then destroyed, discarded, or kept frozen as part of in vitro infertility treatments.

Similarly, there has never been an outcry over the fact that, possibly because of genetic or developmental abnormalities, as many as fifty percent of fertilized eggs do not result in a successful pregnancy and delivery of a living infant. Why no demands for interventions here to prevent this loss of "life"?

-- Mr. Bush's supporters claim that by being the first American president to authorize federal spending on ESC research, he is really a champion of the field.

Well, yes and no. On August 9, 2001, Mr. Bush authorized federal spending on ESC research -- but only on sixty-four cell lines then in existence (of which only about twenty-one are currently available for research purposes).

His supporters characterized this decision as a sound "compromise," but actually it is arbitrary and inconsistent. In essence, the President argued that he is against the use of early embryos because
it requires the destruction of life but that federal funding is OK for research using stem cell lines from embryos for which "the life and death decision had already been made." But if it is morally acceptable to use cell lines from embryos created before that magical date, why is it not also right to create stem cell lines from the estimated half-million unused fertility clinic embryos destined to be destroyed?

-- The Democrats would have us believe that miracle cures for debilitating diseases are just waiting for the Bush restrictions to be repealed. Republicans respond that potential ESC therapies are a mirage and that the Democrats are cruelly manipulating and deceiving desperate patients.

There is some truth on both sides. Most technology goes through a phase in which the product or process is imperfect, and although ESC research is indeed in its infancy, scientists around the world believe this technology offers enormous potential, even if successful therapies are a decade or more away.

-- Senator Kerry's supporters claim that if elected, he will lift all restrictions on ESC research.

He won't, because he wouldn't have the power to do so. The so-called Dickey Amendment of 1996 forbids the "creation of a human embryo or embryos for research purposes." Simply electing Kerry will not, therefore, give a green light to such research. Congress bears much of the responsibility for hindering potential advances.

-- Some commentators who clearly have a moral objection to using embryonic cells claim that adult stem cells offer greater hope for cures.

Only partly true. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) acknowledges that ASCs have recently shown greater "plasticity" -- the ability, under the right conditions, to differentiate into a variety of cell types -- than previously expected. But the NIH also argues, correctly, that ASCs and are more likely to have DNA abnormalities than ESCs and may be more difficult to isolate and purify, and that embryonic cells appear to have much greater developmental potential than adult cells.

The NIH concludes, again correctly, that in the absence of sufficient data, we should "simultaneously pursue all lines of research."

-- Some Republicans argue that the private sector, not government, should fund expanded ESC research.

There is a major role for private investors and other non-governmental funders, but basic scientific research of this sort has long been dominated by NIH funding. If the United States is going to compete in the worldwide race to find stem cell-based cures, NIH funding will be necessary (unless private foundations pick up the shortfall). Scientists in this country should not be held back.

A convergence of views in this debate is unlikely anytime soon, but given the stakes, greater clarity, accuracy, and consistency should not be too much to ask.