Q. FOR BUSH: If Embryonic Stem Cell Work Is Stopped, Should IVF Be Next?

By ACSH Staff — May 24, 2005

Editor’s note: The President’s vow today to veto the bill passed by the House that loosened restrictions on embryonic stem cell research included a dismissal of the idea that there are any "spare" embryos, implying that even IVF procedures should be followed by "adoption" of all the embryos thereby created, not merely the implantation of one best fertilized egg cell in the patient’s womb. It seems timely, then, to take another look at the June 28, 2004 piece on stem cells and IVF written by ACSH's Aubrey Stimola...

Scientists at a private fertility clinic in Chicago isolated twelve new embryonic stem cell lines from genetically flawed human embryos, the Associated Press recently reported. The embryos, which had a total of seven mutations related to genetic diseases, were donated by couples who underwent prenatal genetic screening at the Reproductive Genetics Institute in Chicago. The embryos likely would never have been chosen for implantation given their genetic conditions.

The acquisition of these new stem cell colonies, because of their respective unique genotypes and development states, provides a rare opportunity for scientists to better understand the development of, and perhaps find treatments or cures for, seven heritable diseases, which include two forms of muscular dystrophy. More important, however, it underscores the fact that the number of embryonic stem cells available to researchers in the United States is simply insufficient for national progress on the range of diseases that afflict humans. Perhaps if this were not the case we could make more headway on conditions with genetic components such as Parkinson's or Fragile X Syndrome.

The nation’s limited supply of embryonic stem cells is due to President Bush's restriction of federal funding to 64 cell lines ostensibly created prior to August 2001. The embargo on the creation of new lines was made based on the President's view that this technique -- in which stem cells are extracted from five-day-old embryos, thereby destroying them -- is tantamount to murder.

Since then, the limitations of these cell lines have been made abundantly clear. Of the sixty-four original embryonic stem cell lines, fewer than nineteen are actually available, not nearly enough to meet research demands. Many of these have been maintained in ways that make their use in humans infeasible. In addition, the few colonies that researchers can get their hands on are by no means representative of the wide range of genetic diversity of the human species.

By contrast, an estimated 400,000 embryos of varied genetic composition are sitting in fertility clinic freezers, most of them in excess of couples’ needs and likely to be discarded. These unused embryos are the subjects of a June 8th bipartisan letter to the president signed by fifty-eight senators, fifteen of them Republicans, including Orrin Hatch, Lamar Alexander, and Arlen Specter.
It urged President Bush to loosen the 2001 restrictions by allowing couples to donate extra embryos for research. A similar letter, signed by 206 members of the House, just twelve shy of a majority and including thirty-six Republicans, was sent earlier this month. Mr. Bush, however, has not been swayed. According to White House spokeswoman Jeanie Mamo, "the President continues to believe strongly we should not cross a fundamental moral line by funding or encouraging the destruction of human embryos."

While Mr. Bush's continued stance against embryonic stem cell research seems consistent with his feelings about the sanctity of human life, it evinces his confusion on at least two grounds.

First, the frozen embryos are destined for destruction anyway, unless 400,000 surrogate mothers and adoptive parents step up to the plate. Given the number of children worldwide currently awaiting adoption, this seems an unlikely and impractical scenario. The other option is to keep leftover embryos frozen in perpetuity. But this should pose an ethical problem for Mr. Bush as well. If he truly believes that the destruction of embryos is wrong, shouldn't he attempt to shut down fertility clinics, or at least insist on the immediate perfection of IVF procedures to prevent the accumulation of more unused embryos? Shouldn't keeping a human life in a freezer forever be as morally reprehensible to him as using it for research?

But there is a second moral issue to be considered, as Nancy Reagan -- wife of the late President Reagan, who succumbed to Alzheimer's last week -- would agree. Mr. Bush fails to acknowledge that in protecting 400,000 blastocysts that are destined to be discarded or irreparably damaged in a state of perpetual cryogenicity, he devalues the lives of millions of postnatal individuals (our families, friends, and neighbors) suffering from heritable diseases that may be better understood via embryonic stem cell research. What of his moral responsibility toward them?

While the president should, of course, be cautious in his approach to technologies that employ human embryos, the embryos in question are waiting in limbo. He should attempt to balance the competing moral principles at stake -- the sanctity of the lives of leftover blastocysts vs. the sanctity of the lives of suffering individuals -- as even some of the most conservative members of the House and Senate have.

We can either squander this untapped source of medical knowledge, or employ it as best we can in an attempt to better the health of millions.

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