Late last year, scientists in the U.S. succeeded in isolating and culturing stem cells from a variety of sources: embryos, aborted fetuses, and adults. Stem cells, which are the precursor cells that give rise to the 210 different kinds of tissue in the human body, are believed to have the potential to treat a host of diseases including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes, and cancer.

This astounding achievement caused many to call upon the government to fund research on those cells that were purported to carry the most promise for treating the largest array of diseases-those obtained from human embryos. Because obtaining those cells necessitates the destruction of the embryo, debate began brewing both in the U.S. Congress and in U.S. President Clinton's National Bioethics Advisory Commission regarding the ethical and legal issues involved in such research.

The Center, in conjunction with several organizations and individuals, put together a statement on the issue and released it on July 1 in a Capitol Hill press conference with Senator Brownback of Kansas. The statement, authored by experts in law, science, and ethics, opposed federal funding of such research by outlining the legal and ethical reasons why it is problematic, while asserting that adult stem cells and other methods of restoring diseased or dysfunctional tissue
may actually hold more promise for treatment. Congressional packets which included a copy of the statement, a list of professionals from around the country who signed onto the statement, and relevant scientific articles were distributed to the office of every U.S. Senator and Representative.

There is an existing ban on the use of federal funds for destructive human embryo research. However, the National Institutes of Health and some other advocates of embryonic stem cell research have argued that the ban does not apply to research on stem cells since these cells are not embryos. This was disputed earlier this year by 70 Congressmen and 7 Senators who indicated in a letter to the Department of Health and Human Services that this is an illegitimate reinterpretation of the law. Earlier this fall, the National Bioethics Advisory Commission recommended to the President that researchers be allowed to use federal funds to do research on human embryos, even research that destroys those embryos. Senate majority leader Trent Lott has promised extensive hearings this winter with a vote on the issue of human embryonic stem cell research by February.

Since the release of the Center’s statement, a new coalition has formed to educate people about this issue and to communicate relevant concerns to Congress. The coalition, called Do No Harm: A Coalition of Americans for Research Ethics, has a web site with up-to-date information on the issue and an opportunity to sign up and be a part of the effort. That web address is www.stemcellresearch.org.


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