Using Stem Cells from Embryos Will Make Human Flesh Profitable

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Stem Cell Research

Unless there is a scientific discovery that removes the perceived need for embryonic stem cells, the debate over their use in research is not going away any time soon. Even though the Bush administration is poised to make a decision on federal funding of this research, it stands to reason that embryo research will, like abortion, be the next interminable controversy, albeit along very different battle lines--lines where economics is the unifying force for immoral policy.

It has been two and a half years since stem cells were first isolated and grown from human embryos by James A. Thompson of the University of Wisconsin and John D. Gearhart of Johns Hopkins University. In that time the United States has failed to resolve the fight over federal funding of the research. In Germany, a nation that is usually one of the strongest in Europe in defending human dignity, some politicians have begun to show weakness when the promises of stem cells are dangled before them.

In the United States the debate has been getting emotional. Patients-advocacy groups have been trotting out on the public stage people who suffer from some of the terrible ailments that stem cell research is promising to address. Hollywood celebrities such as Christopher Reeve (most famous for his portrayal of Superman) who has a broken spine from a equestrian accident, Michael J. Fox who suffers from Parkinson's disease, and Mary Tyler Moore who is a diabetic, are testifying before Congress and lobbying the public in support of destructive human embryo research using their . Mr. Reeve and Mr. Fox are putting personal fortunes and their celebrity fundraising power into foundations which help to underwrite their cause. All this while they play on the favor of fans.

For those who support all types of stem cell research, the goal is simple. Open up every possible door of research in hopes of finding a cure for otherwise incurable conditions. It is a noble goal...a loving goal. But it is one that is fraught with danger.
For those unfamiliar with stem cell research, stem cells are "precursor" cells, less-specialized cells which give rise to the more specialized cells of the body such as brain, blood, skin, etc. There are two types of stem cells, typically referred to as "embryonic" and "adult." Embryonic stem cells come from embryos in the first few days after fertilization and are the least specialized stem cells. The cells are extracted from the embryo's inner mass, destroying the embryo in the process. Scientists hope to learn how to steer these cells to become the specific specialized cells a particular patient might need.

There are many obstacles which lie in the path of getting these cells to work. Scientists must learn how to steer them properly, keeping them from "overgrowing" and turning into a cancer, and prevent possible immune rejection if the cells come from an embryo with a different genetic makeup. The last of these problems is one reason why Britain has moved to allow "therapeutic" cloning (cloning with the intention of destroying the resulting embryo for "therapeutic" use) and some in the United States only want to ban "reproductive" cloning (cloning with the intention of bringing a cloned baby to term). If using stem cells from embryos becomes a reality, a patient might clone himself to obtain the stem cells for implantation and thereby avoid tissue rejection. Yet, the question remains, how many patients might be willing to kill their twin to achieve their medical miracle?

In contrast to embryonic stem cells, adult stem cells are more specialized and give rise to the cells that do the everyday work of life. In contrast what their name implies, adult stem cells are not only found in adults, but in everyone from the youngest child to the eldest senior. When first isolated, it was believed that adult stem cells could not change to be different types of cells and tissues. However, adult stem cells have been found to be very malleable. They have been able to change from brain cells to blood cells, and from blood cells to muscle, nerve, or liver cells. In addition, adult stem cells have proven much more effective for medical treatment than embryonic cells. Several adult stem cell therapies are in clinical trials in the United States, while no clinical trials using embryonic cells have been introduced.

One of the primary arguments for doing research on embryonic cells is that adult stem cells have not been isolated in every type of tissue. If adult cells cannot be identified in all types of tissue, it would seem necessary to use embryonic cells that theoretically have the capacity to become any type of tissue. This argument seems premature at best given that research is continually identifying new adult stem cell types (one of the latest being in fat) and discovering new ways to manipulate the cells. In addition, PPL Therapeutics, the firm that produced the sheep clone Dolly, has indicated a breakthrough in the stem cell research field--the ability to turn ordinary cells into adult stem cells. Many in the research community are waiting in anticipation for PPL's release of data, which will likely happen once they receive a patent on their discovery. Kevin Fitzgerald, a cancer researcher with Georgetown University in Washington, DC, says that if true, this discovery alone could end the need to pursue embryonic stem cells altogether.

But until a scientific white knight arrives, this debate will continue. And, unfortunately for the public trying to understand the issues, the frequent references to abortion in public debate on stem cell research is misleading. Other than the fact that human life ends in both cases, there are many other differences that should be considered when evaluating the issue.

No one except extreme reproductive rights activists are happy that abortion takes place. It is usually viewed in society as a necessary evil. Surveys in the United States reveal that about 70% of the public believe that abortion is the killing of a human being while a similar percentage believes it also ought to be legal. One reason for the seeming contradiction is a belief that the mother has right to autonomy over her own body (the right to do what she thinks is best for herself). In the conflict of rights between child and mother, the mother wins.

Unless scientists have developed some sort of "right to research" or patients have developed a "right to be cured," there is no conflict of rights between embryos and anyone else. The determination of whether research
on embryos or embryo parts should be legal should rest on our understanding of human life, human dignity, and what protections human beings should receive rather than from any perceived benefit dependent upon the abuse of human life.

When a woman has an abortion, she does not gain anything of benefit. Other than in cases of fetal abnormality, abortion is usually an attempt to restore the mother's life and body back to the point prior to pregnancy. No woman gets pregnant so she has the opportunity to get an abortion. Regardless of the perceived rightness or wrongness of abortion, the practice does not turn human life into a commodity.

On the other hand, embryonic stem cell research provides gain, both to the researcher as well as, potentially, the patient. Through this research, human life is destroyed for its parts, which can then be bought and sold as a therapeutic agent. The world recoils in disgust at the global black market in human organs. Recent Congressional testimony reports that the Chinese government is participating in this trade by selling the organs of prisoners. This disgust is appropriate because the commodification of human beings, beginning with the small, weak, or defenseless, is not only immoral, but threatens us all. If democratic, capitalist societies allow living human parts to become a commodity, how long before those who stand to make a profit from such sales begin pushing for laws to expand the definition of what human flesh can be traded?

The Germans debate on this issue is helpful to analyze. Ever since the fall of the Third Reich, Germany has been a stalwart upholder of human rights, remaining quite conservative on issues while much of Europe begins legalizing all sorts of inhumane activities. Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, president of Deutche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), the central public funding organization for academic research in Germany, said in a recent interview with Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung that "We don't want to work with embryos that have been produced for research purposes" because of the problem of turning human beings into a commodity. Mr. Winnacker misses the point that any research on embryos, and the therapies which may result, require their destruction and turn human life into a commodity because monetary value is now found in the living parts of human beings. This is not only true of embryos. For most people, their individual organs are worth more on the black market than the value of their life insurance plan.

It should be said that doing research on embryonic parts is good science. But so is taking random people in the population, giving them a deadly disease, and watching the progression. There are certain things we just don't do because they undermine our society and assault our humanity. During the annual "Berlin Speech" on May 18th, German President Johannes Rau spoke ardently in defense of human dignity and against the subjection of human life to economic interests saying, "Surely we can agree that an ethically unjustifiable act does not become allowable simply by promising economic benefit." If economics begin determining our ethics, if money is our ruler for how we treat our neighbor, we will slowly begin to cannibalize ourselves. The only protection from harm will become wealth and power.

The potential for economic benefit has become the impetus for building coalitions that are defying ideological divisions and party politics. Free-market capitalists and investors have joined with patient advocates and scientists to favor an unrestrained biotech future. The recent German Parliament debate on bioethics is just one illustration of the political upheaval that biotechnology is generating. Many worry about being left behind in the biotechnological revolution. But willingness to make economic criteria primary in social ethics, as German Chancellor Gerard Schroder recently suggested, undermines the very social structures that support that economic system.

The legalization of abortion has caused many social problems of its own. But those problems are fundamentally different and pale in significance to the risk society takes when humanity becomes an object of trade and our moral foundation become a product subject to market forces. The current debate should focus on how to lead the world away from this cesspool of depravity rather than joining in and grasp for profits. Contrary to popular
opinion in the west, there are some things money cannot buy.

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