



Appeared in *The Catholic Virginian* July 23, 2001

Stem Cell Research

I had heard about stem cell research taking place in laboratories, but at first I never paid much attention to it because it all seemed so complicated and confusing. Like many others I probably could not fathom what could be wrong about scientists trying to transform batches of cells into replacement parts for damaged organs. At first glance it would seem that good would be achieved by repairing or replacing damaged body parts with new cells which might, just might, reverse such terrible diseases as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. Scientists now hope to use cells to grow replacement tissue for persons with damaged hearts, diabetes, muscular dystrophy and many other human ailments.

Just in the past few weeks our church leaders have raised concern over the moral and ethical issues surrounding this type of research. The fact that something can be done does not make it morally right even if there might be some future benefit. Newspapers and national magazines have brought vividly to my attention what actually has been taking place in research laboratories.

An article in the Richmond Times-Dispatch of July 12 reveals that the Eastern Virginia Medical School's fertility clinic, named the Jones Institute, had mixed donated eggs and sperm to create human embryos in a petri dish for the express purpose of extracting stem cells. Live embryos would be sacrificed for the benefit of research and would not be used for implantation into a woman to achieve pregnancy.

Another article in the newspaper the next day revealed that a Massachusetts company is trying to use cloning technology to create human embryos, again outside the womb. Experiments have been kept secret for over a year. Women were being recruited as egg donors to produce living embryos from which cells can be extracted. Five-day-old embryos have the capacity to develop cells which, in turn, might become various kinds of human tissue.

The controversy continues because aborted fetuses have the same potential. What about the use of "spare" or "excess" embryos from fertility clinics or the

use of the estimated 100,000-plus frozen embryos as subjects for human experimentation and the possible federal funding of such research?

The issue simply put is the value that we as a society place on the protection of embryonic life. Since stem cell research involves the destruction of the human embryo, such destruction must be condemned as morally wrong. The human embryo is the beginning of human life. The embryo is morally deserving of the same protection accorded all other members of the human species. Human life has rights of itself and deserves no less care at its beginning than any other stage in life. The starting point in making moral judgments is the need to uphold the sacredness of human life.

The present debate centers on the use of federal funding for research that relies on the destruction of human life at its earliest stages. The Catholic bishops of the United States have taken a firm stand for the principle that government must not treat any human being as research material, as a mere means for the benefit of others. Embryonic stem cell research opens the door to broader assaults on innocent human life in the name of research. Research benefits should not outweigh the inviolable dignity of innocent human life. As the bishops warn, a research enterprise impatient with moral limits increasingly leads us into what Pope John Paul II describes as the culture of death.

The question arises of alternatives to the use, or rather the misuse of embryonic human life. Scientists have the option to use stem cells from adults without any destruction or negative consequences to life itself. Adult stem cell research has already had therapeutic results and has helped thousands of patients with various ailments. The use of stem cells from adults is certainly morally permissible and worthy of government support.

Certainly the debate will continue in the days ahead. Several states have outlawed the experimentation on human embryos. I oppose our government's providing financial support for the destruction of human embryos for research purposes. Embryonic stem cell research has not helped a single human patient or demonstrated any therapeutic benefit. It has, however, had a lethal effect on nascent human life.

Once again we are all challenged to uphold the consistent ethic of life. We are called in both our minds and hearts to constantly promote the gospel of life which is opposed by the growing culture of death.

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