



Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities

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Dear Member of Congress:

Soon the House of Representatives will again vote on legislation (H.R. 3) to promote the destruction of human embryos to obtain their stem cells. Again supporters of this legislation will seek to ensure that no *other* avenue of stem cell research is considered or approved. Again they will ignore or dismiss the mounting evidence that research posing no moral problem will be more immediately beneficial for patients with devastating diseases. And once again, ironically, supporters will accuse those who disagree of being obstructionist and narrow-minded, of failing to support all possible avenues for medical progress.

Yet this is not a matter of *supporting vs. opposing* progress. The question is whether our technical progress will be guided by an equally advanced sense of the dignity of each and every human life, so that our technology becomes a servant to humanity and not our cruel master. The technological imperative – the conviction that if some interesting research avenue or procedure exists, then it must be pursued whatever the moral and human cost – has governed this debate for far too long. As Pope Benedict XVI said to stem cell researchers meeting in Rome on September 16, research that relies on “the planned suppression of human beings who already exist, even if they have not yet been born,” is “not truly at the service of humanity.”

On a practical level, embryonic stem cell research has been as disappointing in its results as it has been divisive to our society. After almost three decades of research in mouse embryonic stem cells and nine years in the human variety, researchers can scarcely point to a safe and effective “cure” for any condition in mice let alone human beings. Problems such as uncontrollable growth and tumor formation have forced researchers to conclude that it may take a decade or more of very expensive research even to determine whether embryonic stem cells may someday be used to treat a human condition.

At the same time, ethically sound research using non-embryonic stem cells has continued to advance, helping patients with over 70 conditions in early peer-reviewed studies (see www.stemcellresearch.org). Since Congress debated this issue last summer, further evidence has emerged on the versatility of adult stem cells, and on the likelihood that they can be reprogrammed to enhance this quality. It now seems that virtually every byproduct of live birth – amniotic fluid, amniotic membrane, placenta, cord blood, and the tissue of the umbilical cord itself – contains stem cells that may rival embryonic stem cells in their flexibility.

In other words, the “frozen embryo” so sought by researchers as mere research material is not likely to provide cures in the foreseeable future. Yet if the same embryo were allowed to survive and be born, instead of being killed with Congress’s approval, his or her birth may provide more beneficial stem cells for human treatments, including treatments for this same child’s medical conditions.

The sad reality is that many promising avenues of medical progress have received inadequate funding and attention on the road to human treatments. This is due in part to an exaggerated and almost exclusive focus on destructive embryo research in the political and policymaking arena. Even the national cord blood stem cell bank that Congress approved a year ago, which could benefit many thousands of Americans immediately, has received minimal funding.

For more information on these and other aspects of this issue, I would encourage you to contact the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities at prolife@usccb.org.

In considering your vote on H.R. 3, then, I urge you first to consider the fundamental moral line Congress would cross if it approves this legislation. The federal government has never taken the crass utilitarian approach of forcing taxpayers to support the direct killing of innocent human life, at *any* stage of development, in the name of “progress.” Secondly I urge you to vote against H.R. 3 for the sake of genuine progress for suffering patients, who deserve better solutions than this most speculative and most divisive type of stem cell research. Please reject H.R. 3, and support medical progress that we can all live with.

Sincerely,



Cardinal Justin Rigali
Archbishop of Philadelphia
Chairman, Committee for Pro-Life Activities
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops