

The Politics of Stem Cells

Last evening, Ron Reagan took the stage at the Democratic National Convention and put the issue of stem cell research squarely in the middle of presidential politics. Some people have argued that issues of science should be kept out of the political realm. But stem cell research is inevitably, and even properly, a political matter.

Stem cells hold the promise of cures for many diseases because of their unique properties. They come in a couple of major varieties. The first are the so-called adult stem cells, which are those cells with limited capacity to give rise to at least to certain types of tissues. So, for example, blood-forming stem cells make all forms of blood. The other major type, embryonic stem cells, are believed to have more promise because scientists can potentially direct them to develop into almost any kind of cell in the body. These cells are extracted from a pre-embryo that is only six days old. The idea is to use them to grow tissues to cure diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, spinal cord injuries, and other conditions that produce suffering in millions of people and those that care for them.

The major ethical stumbling block comes from the fact that extracting embryonic stem cells kills human embryos. Thus, stem cell research thrusts us directly into the religious and philosophical questions of the moral status of the human embryo and what ethical obligations the rest of us have toward it.

As the abortion debate has demonstrated, this issue will never likely reach resolution in a pluralistic society on rational grounds alone. Human embryos are either mere biological tissue worthy of no moral respect, or they are worthy of some respect but not that owed to one who is born, or they are worthy of the same moral respect we accord the adult human being.

I believe it is fair to say that most people believe that even the pre-embryo has some moral standing or value. And if that is the case, society cannot avoid the unenviable responsibility of ethical hairsplitting on an issue in which moral certainty eludes us and medical benefits are unproven.

Certain ethical tradeoffs are also entailed by decisions on the *source* of embryonic stem cells. They can come from one of three sources, all of which are fraught with ethical problems, but to varying degrees. One source would be the 100,000-plus embryos leftover from fertility clinics. Most of them will be simply discarded or left until they become unusable. Using them for potentially lifesaving therapies allows some good to come out of an already troublesome fate. Scientists could also create embryonic stem cells using in vitro fertilization techniques. Thus, one is creating early human life with the purpose of research that involves life's destruction, which seems ethically worse than using leftover embryos created for reproduction. Finally, stem cells could be taken from embryos developed through cloning one's own cells—so-called therapeutic cloning. The advantage here is that the person who needs them could clone cells that would be a genetic match, thereby eliminating potential problems with tissue rejection. That makes

cloning the best possible technique for providing medical benefits, but it also opens the door, many believe, to human reproductive cloning.

Additional ethical issues are raised by the use of public funds. President Bush has disallowed the use of public funds for research that would involve creation and destruction of embryos, allowing funds only for research on stem cell lines already created. There is no restriction on funding or research in the private sector.

Stem cell research is another example of scientific advancement raising an ethical dilemma—that is, a decision that cannot be reached without sacrificing some moral good. Good ethical analysis requires that people seek the greatest balance of right over wrong.

On its face, it seems that funding adult stem cells is the ethically easiest route. Recent studies have shown that they may have wider potential for use than previously thought.

But, would disallowing funding for other techniques neglect what may prove to be the best and fastest routes to alleviate human suffering? Such decisions are not easily made in the face of scientific uncertainty, unknown consequences, and judgments about moral obligations toward human embryos. As the promise for stem cells grows, the ethical balance tips in favor of a more aggressive use of sources and funds.

What we can say is that this is not a decision without ethical cost, but it is one that must be made by all of us together. And that brings us to politics, for it is our representatives at the federal and state levels who, for better or worse, must make the tough choices about funding. We have the responsibility to make our wishes for the good of our society known to them.

This is Mark Hanson of the Practical Ethics Center at the University of Montana