

John McCain and the Stem Cell Debate

As this issue goes to press, it has become clear that Senator John McCain of Arizona will be the Republican Party's candidate for the presidency in this year's election. On its face, this would seem to mean that, regardless of who wins the election in November, President George W. Bush's embryonic stem cell funding policy will be overturned. All of the Democratic candidates for president argued against the Bush policy, with Senator Hillary Clinton repeatedly—and inaccurately—describing it as a ban on stem cell research, and Senator Barack Obama saying in June 2007 that “the promise that stem cells hold does not come from any particular ideology; it is the judgment of science, and we deserve a president who will put that judgment first.”

Senator McCain, to his credit, has not engaged in such irresponsible rhetoric. He has not intentionally distorted the nature of the stem cell debate, and he has not argued that science must always supersede ethical principles. But McCain has nonetheless twice voted in favor of a bill that would overturn the Bush policy regarding the funding of stem cell research. He is therefore on record as supporting the use of taxpayer dollars to provide an ongoing incentive for the destruction of living human embryos. It is the only exception to the Senator's otherwise spotless pro-life record. It was, he told Florida voters in January, “a very agonizing and tough decision” for him—but one he considers justified because the bill in question only involves embryos created for fertility treatment and not implanted by their parents.

By adopting that logic, McCain has unfortunately accepted a crass utilitarian case for the destruction of life for research. To be unwanted, after all, is not to become worthless, and the fact that some human embryos have been abandoned by their parents is hardly a case for destroying them for science. The moral issues at stake are far from simple, to be sure, but Senator McCain's rationalization of embryo-destructive research is nonetheless simply wrong.

Moreover, in the months since the Senator cast his two stem cell votes, scientific advances have dramatically weakened the case for taxpayer funding for the destruction of embryos for research. In November 2007, two teams of researchers announced a stunning advance: they had

successfully transformed normal human skin cells into what appears to be the functional equivalent of embryonic stem cells, without the need for embryos. Such “somatic cell reprogramming” appears to allow for the benefits of pluripotent stem cells without the ethical violations inherent in the destruction of living embryos. Since that first announcement, it has become clear that a very large and growing number of laboratories around the world are taking up this approach. Several additional advances have been announced, with more—including early human trials in the use of these cells—now known to be imminent.

“It is the beginning of the end of the controversy that has surrounded this field,” said University of Wisconsin biologist James Thomson, the researcher who first isolated human embryonic stem cells a decade ago, and who also led one of the teams that announced the reprogramming advance last November. “Ten years of turmoil and now this nice ending,” he added. In a February 2008 poll sponsored by the Ethics and Public Policy Center, voters were asked whether they, too, thought this advance should end the debate; two-thirds responded that it should.

It does indeed look like a nice ending may be in store for the stem cell debate, one that will not require either side to surrender its aspirations and aims—a win-win proposition, by which scientific research and moral principle can be championed together rather than set in opposition. The possibility of such common ground was precisely the logic behind President Bush’s stem cell funding policy in the first place. “My administration has sought to understand the dilemmas of stem cell research not as a choice between science and ethics, but as a challenge to advance medicine while meeting our solemn obligation to defend human life,” the president said in 2007.

Since its announcement in August 2001, critics of President Bush’s stem cell policy have argued that the benefits that might be gained from research conducted using more and newer lines of embryonic stem cells should cause the president to reverse his decision. They argued the president was ignoring the changing “facts on the ground,” and that his policy was tragically stubborn. But President Bush’s policy was grounded in the moral circumstances surrounding the derivation of embryonic stem cells, not the scientific circumstances. Those fundamental moral circumstances did not change over the years—at least until ways of deriving pluripotent cells without destroying embryos emerged. These new techniques do change the circumstances, but in ways that affirm, rather than undermine, the logic of the president’s approach. Common ground, it seems, really is possible.

Today, the case for using taxpayer dollars to destroy, for research purposes, embryos that were created for fertility treatment is weaker not just on moral grounds but also on scientific grounds. Since those fertility-clinic embryos are available essentially at random, their genetics are not known in advance—but the new ethically uncontroversial reprogramming technique allows for the creation of genetically-tailored cells. To study diabetes, for instance, researchers will be able to take a skin sample from a diabetic and produce pluripotent cells with that individual’s genetic identity. It will not be necessary to rely on the indiscriminate and lethal lottery envisioned by the bills President Bush has now twice vetoed.

These developments change the basic landscape of the stem cell debate, and Senator McCain has signaled that he is at least aware that this might require a rethinking. Asked by a voter in late January if the new advances might cause him to reconsider his stand on President Bush’s stem cell funding policy, Senator McCain replied, “I have not changed my position yet.”

It is time he did. The pro-life principles McCain has always championed demand it, and recent scientific advances only make the moral picture clearer. Senator McCain should reexamine the facts, reaffirm his commitment to the crucial moral principles at stake, and come around to support the Bush funding policy.