

Do Embryos Vote?

Stem Cell Politics in an Election Year

Two and a half years ago, when George W. Bush announced his new policy regarding federal funding of embryonic stem cell research, it seemed as though bioethics might turn out to be a major political priority for the new administration. The announcement was President Bush's first prime-time televised address to the nation, and the policy itself—funding work on stem cell lines derived from embryos destroyed before the August 9, 2001 announcement, but not

after—seemed certain to keep the controversy alive rather than put it to rest.

But that was a month before September 11, 2001, and so, in our national life, it was another era entirely. In the intervening years, the science of stem cells has progressed somewhat, though there has been no decisive medical breakthrough. And the age of human cloning is here, now that scientists in South Korea have cloned human embryos. But so far, political action has not followed suit.

The expected congressional challenge to Bush's stem cell funding policy never materialized, and although hearings have been held, articles and books have been published, and the issue has occasionally surfaced in the newspapers, nothing of any political consequence has happened in two years.

Each of the politicians vying for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination this year promised that if he were elected, something would indeed happen: the Bush policy on cloning, stem cells, or both would be reversed.

Senator Joe Lieberman, whose candidacy ended earlier this winter, promised immediate change: "The first day that I am privileged to enter the Oval Office," read a statement from the candidate, "I will rescind George W. Bush's restrictions on stem cell research. I will also ensure that promising research on somatic cell nuclear transfer—the technique used in cloning—is not hindered by right-wing efforts."

Senator John Kerry has no greater patience for those "right-wing efforts," though he also seems confused about the actual facts of federal stem cell research policy. "Embryonic stem cells hold the potential to cure diseases, and yet this President banned embryonic stem cell research except for what he said would be over 60 stem cell lines already in exist-

ence," Kerry stated. He then continued, with conviction, "but there are only 11 lines available and they aren't diverse enough to meet research needs." Actually, 12 lines were available when Kerry made his statement, and since then the number has risen to 15 and will keep rising as more of the 78 lines *eligible* for funding under Bush's policy (that is, created before August 9, 2001) become *available*. The delay is in many cases a scientific delay, since it takes time to prepare and characterize each stem cell line to the point where it is useful for research. But more importantly, the current policy does not ban embryonic stem cell research or the creation of new stem cell lines. It bans nothing, and it offers (for the first time) federal taxpayer money for research that uses the approved 78 lines.

Senator John Edwards avoided such brazen misstatements of fact by resorting to vagueness. In his official statement on the subject, released in response to a questionnaire from the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research (CAMR), Edwards said that he supports the Hatch-Feinstein cloning bill, which permits and endorses the creation of cloned embryos for research. And what of federal funding of embryonic stem cell research? Edwards said only that "the NIH must continue to support important research involving adult stem cells and cellular material derived from cord blood." He left open the possibility that he would not reverse the Bush policy on embryonic cells ... maybe.

Howard Dean brooked no such ambiguity on the subject. The former Vermont governor, before ending his campaign in February, pledged to "rescind the current restrictive stem cell research policy established by President Bush on August 9, 2001,

as a first step toward finding new therapies and cures.” He also pledged to ban reproductive cloning while endorsing cloning-for-biomedical-research “by signing” the same Hatch-Feinstein bill. One wonders whether he planned to wait (in vain) for Congress to pass the bill first, or whether he just planned to jot his signature across a copy of it to fulfill his pledge.

Dean also went further than the others and pledged to “appoint a Presidential Bioethics Commission that is truly bipartisan and independent.” This was a thinly veiled reference to Bush’s own commission—the President’s Council on Bioethics (whose October 2003 report *Beyond Therapy* is the subject of a symposium in this issue of *The New Atlantis*).

Dean’s dig came just as the Council released a new monitoring report on the state of stem cell research under the Bush funding policy. Whether it was *truly* bipartisan or not we cannot say, but the monitoring document took no position of its own on the Bush policy, and it made no recommendations. Instead, it sought to clear up some of the confusion that has characterized the public debate about stem cells.

Democratic politicians are not the only ones who have been confused about just what the current policy does and does not do. The President himself, in a telephoned address to the annual March for Life in January, listed among the pro-life *achievements* of his administration the fact that “we’re opposed to the destruction of embryos for stem cell research.” His policy, however, does not stop embryo destruction, but only withholds public funding that might encourage it. And so far, the Bush administration has not offered any proposal to limit embryo research in the private sector—most likely because it believes such limits are politically impossible.

Bush and the Democrats can at least offer up the excuse that stem cells are not their field, and that they have a war and an economy to worry about. The panel of experts drawn together by Johns Hopkins University to report on safety issues in stem cell research has no such excuse. In a well publicized report, published in the journal *Fertility and Sterility*, the group concluded that the stem cell lines approved by the administration for funding could prove unsafe for clinical use, because “all of [the approved] lines were derived using mouse feeder layers,” which might contaminate them. The claim is patently false, as the National Institutes of Health has repeatedly made clear.

In its review of the stem cell debate, the President’s Council report demonstrates that such confusion over basic facts has been rampant in the past two years. In a nearly endless chapter recounting the back-and-forth among competing views of the Bush policy and the ethics of embryo research, the Council report paints a picture of a field caught up in a profound bewilderment, occasionally punctuated and exacerbated by intentional distortion, all couched in familiar mantras to which no one listens.

Almost no one seems to actually know what the Bush Administration’s funding policy entails, or how it has been carried out. The Council had to begin its report with an extended description of the two-year-old policy, because every element of its form and function has been ill-described from the start by those who were supposed to be the experts. Some fine distinctions (between eligible and available stem cell lines, between public funding and permission, between embryonic and adult stem cells) are regularly trodden over with abandon, while the now-familiar public to-

and-fro over the moral standing of human embryos continues to carve out deep and well-worn trenches in our public life, from which combatants strafe each other at a distance, rarely advancing or retreating.

Supporters and opponents of the Bush policy are equally guilty of what has been the most common and perhaps the most significant distortion of the debate. Almost without exception, they have ignored the fact that the policy only deals with *federal*

funding, and not with whether embryonic stem cell research should be permitted at all.

The question that advocates of taxpayer funding for embryonic stem cell research should confront is this: In a nation with a thriving private biotechnology sector, and in which much of the citizenry thinks that nascent human life should not be destroyed for research, is it really necessary to turn embryo destruction into a massive public works project?