

The Stem Cell Race

John Kerry and the Democrats Search for an Issue

Strange things happen in election years, but few this year have been more peculiar than the prominence of a burgeoning sub-field of cell biology in the presidential race. Next to the war on terror and the state of the economy, stem cell research is the issue everyone is talking about.

This summer, the Democratic Party wholeheartedly embraced embryonic stem cell research as a central component of its election-year agenda. The party's platform, prepared for the July convention in Boston, declared:

"President Bush has rejected the calls from Nancy Reagan, Christopher Reeve and Americans across the land

for assistance with embryonic stem cell research. We will reverse his wrongheaded policy. Stem cell therapy offers hope to more than 100 million Americans who have serious illnesses—from Alzheimer's to heart disease to juvenile diabetes to Parkinson's. We will pursue this research under the strictest ethical guidelines, but we will not walk away from the chance to save lives and reduce human suffering."

The document offered no clue as to what these "strictest ethical guidelines" might be, or indeed why there is any ethical problem with the research at all. The only problem seems to be President Bush.

The convention itself persisted in this theme, and brought the stem cell issue to center-stage. The subject was mentioned no less than twenty times from the podium, including during Senator John Kerry's acceptance speech. To great applause, Kerry said to the conventioners:

"And now it's our time to ask: What if? What if we find a breakthrough to cure Parkinson's, diabetes, Alzheimer's and AIDS? What if we have a president who believes in science, so we can unleash the wonders of discovery like stem cell research to treat illness and save millions of lives?"

And perhaps more notably, the Democrats brought out Ron Reagan, the ultra-liberal son of the late Republican President Ronald Reagan, to make a pitch for embryonic stem cell research funding. As Gilbert Meilaender notes earlier in this issue of *The New Atlantis*, Reagan outdid others on the convention floor by openly making a plea for taxpayer funding of therapeutic cloning—the creation of cloned human embryos purely for the purpose of destroying them for their stem cells. Not realizing that Congressional Democrats have deliberately excluded federal funding of cloning from the two bills they have introduced to overturn the Bush stem cell policy, and likely not even realizing that Reagan was talking about cloning at all, the crowd at the convention welcomed the young Reagan's appeal enthusiastically.

Building on that momentum, the Kerry campaign continued to push the

stem cell theme in speeches and events following the convention. On a conference call with reporters in August, vice presidential candidate John Edwards even embraced Ron Reagan's sly move, and said that he and Kerry supported not only stem cell research using IVF embryos, but also therapeutic cloning, although he was not clear about whether they would support taxpayer funding for cloning.

In all of these remarks, both Kerry and Edwards continue to repeat a series of distortions and (at best) half-truths about embryonic stem cell research and the Bush policy.

Both of them regularly declare in their stump speeches that the Bush administration has "banned" stem cell research, which is flatly false. There are in fact no restrictions at all on stem cell research, whether adult or embryonic, in the United States, making this country the most liberal of all the Western democracies on this subject. Using private funds, researchers can do whatever they wish. Using public funds, they can use a fixed group of embryonic stem cells lines, where the embryos in question had already been destroyed before the president's policy went into effect. There are, as of this writing, 22 embryonic stem cell lines available for federal funding (an increase of three since the last issue of this quarterly journal, with more on the way), and nearly 500 shipments drawn from these lines have already been made to researchers. The NIH provided about \$25 million for embryonic stem cell research last year and

spent another \$180 million on ethically non-controversial adult stem cell work.

To call this a ban would mean that the government has “banned” anything it does not fully subsidize, which would include almost everything anyone does in America. Far from a ban, there is in fact a total absence of limits on stem cell research, along with fairly substantial public subsidies for the work.

Kerry and Edwards also suggest in their statements that if only the Bush administration would get out of the way, scientists would very soon cure diseases affecting over 100 million Americans. But the research is only in its infancy—there has never yet been even a single human trial using embryonic stem cells for any purpose. And some of the specific diseases called out in the stump speeches are unlikely ever to benefit from the research. Even Ron Reagan, who was presumably worth listening to because his father had just died of Alzheimer’s, was careful not to mention Alzheimer’s disease in his speech to the Democratic convention. This is because, as the *Washington Post* put it in June, “the infrequently voiced reality, stem cell experts confess, is that, of all the diseases that may someday be cured by embryonic stem cell treatments, Alzheimer’s is among the least likely to benefit.” Asked why Alzheimer’s keeps coming up in discussions of stem cells anyway, NIH stem cell expert Ronald McKay told the *Post* that “people need a fairy tale.” Senator Kerry has continued relating this particular fairy tale in his speeches (along

with others about curing whole categories of diseases, and even AIDS), as he did at the Boston convention.

There is more to this than the usual problem of inflated promises in an election year. The promises being made on this front are not political but medical and scientific, and the people being told to expect salvation after November are not just swing voters but also very sick people, suffering terribly from horrendous diseases that are slowly robbing them of their lives. They and their families are desperate for any shred of good news about treatments and cures. But Senator Kerry and the Democrats are not qualified to offer such news, and the actual researchers who know what they’re talking about are far more reserved and restrained in their predictions. Running for president on a platform of curing Parkinson’s disease—and especially when no such cure is in the offing—takes shameless pandering to a whole new level and greatly deserves those who are sick.

Moreover, amid all this huffing and puffing, very little is said about why embryonic stem cell research is actually ethically controversial, or why the administration has adopted the policy now in place. When the issue is discussed in the media, and even when pollsters ask voters about it, one key fact is generally left out: embryonic stem cell research involves the intentional destruction of living, developing human embryos, so that their cells may be extracted and used. This is why it raises moral concerns, and why an

indiscriminate policy of funding the research would be so troubling to so many Americans. It is why President Bush has sought a way to aid the basic science without supporting or encouraging such embryo destruction.

The Democrats do not so much dismiss or refute this ethical concern as simply ignore it. It is never discussed, and voters are left to wonder why Bush wants to set certain limits on federal funding at all. Polls that seek public opinion on this subject generally formulate questions like this one in a recent *Economist* poll of registered voters:

“There is a type of medical research that involves using special cells, called stem cells, that are obtained from human embryos. Some people favor stem cell research, saying the embryos otherwise would be discarded and that this research could lead to breakthroughs for treating serious diseases. Other people oppose this type of research—they say it uses cells from potentially viable human embryos and that this research can be done on animals or by using other types of cells instead. What about you? Do you favor stem cell research, oppose it, or neither favor nor oppose it?”

Nowhere is the voter told that the research involves not only “using” or “obtaining” cells from human embryos, but destroying the embryos in the process. Absent that information, it is not surprising that 65 percent of those questioned supported the research. Indeed, it is surprising that the number was not higher.

Even some of those people who

actively advocate for federal funding of stem cell research sometimes do not realize what it involves. In June, Republican Congressman Mark Souder, who supports the administration’s qualified funding policy, met with a constituent with two diabetic granddaughters. The constituent had come to ask the Congressman to support unrestricted federal funding. But when Souder explained to him that the research involves destroying human embryos, the constituent—Carl Kallsen of Fort Wayne, Indiana—admitted he had not realized this fact, and that now knowing it, he was opposed to the research himself.

The Bush policy, which is maligned by the Democrats without ever being described, seeks a principled middle ground for stem cell policy. It supports basic science on existing embryonic stem cell lines, but without compelling every American taxpayer to pay for its most controversial aspects. It confronts the moral hazards of embryo destruction, while acknowledging that the nation is morally divided about this issue. The policy does not fully satisfy either side in the embryo debate—it neither bans all embryo research nor funds all embryo research—but it does offer a prudent set of guidelines for public funding policy.

Rather than offer counterarguments to Bush’s approach, the Democrats in this election year have attempted to make an issue out of stem cell research by fudging the science, ignoring the ethical issues, distorting the Bush policy, and promising the moon. Time will

tell if they can really move voters with such craven tactics. In the meantime, *The New Atlantis* would like to invite

the federal government to “ban” our magazine, by giving us \$25 million per year to do our work.