



Life Issues Forum

Destroying Life: An End in Itself? by Richard Doerflinger

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In one sense, the recent congressional debate on stem cell research produced little that was new.

Congress approved H.R. 810, to fund stem cell research that requires destroying human embryos – but President Bush vetoed it, and fortunately Congress lacked the two-thirds support to override that veto. The President did sign a new law to prohibit “fetus farming,” the use of fetal tissue from unborn children deliberately implanted in wombs for research purposes – but this is a preventive measure, as researchers have attempted this only in animals so far.

One new and disturbing element, however, was a decision by proponents of H.R. 810 to oppose stem cell research does *not* require destroying human life. They blocked enactment of a bill that should have been uncontroversial, and marked a new stage in the debate that could delay treatments for vulnerable patients.

The bill was S. 2754, the Alternative Pluripotent Stem Cell Therapies Enhancement Act. It would have funded alternative research to obtain cells with the properties of embryonic stem cells, without harming or using human embryos. Recent studies suggest that “pluripotency,” the ability to produce the many cell types of the body, may be found in stem cells from adult tissue and umbilical cord blood – or may be stimulated by “reprogramming” adult cells. This bill was introduced by Senators Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Arlen Specter (R-PA), leaders on opposite sides of the embryo research debate, who agreed that everyone should support ways to reap whatever benefits may come from embryonic stem cells without the moral controversy. The bill passed 100-to-0, in a Senate which also voted 63-to-37 in favor of H.R. 810.

In the House, however, a more divisive attitude prevailed. S. 2754 was subjected to misleading criticisms by Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE) and other sponsors of H.R. 810. Ironically, they claimed the bill would fund speculative research and detract from stem cell research with “proven” benefits – a charge better directed against embryonic stem cell research itself, which lags far behind adult stem cells in showing any clinical benefit. In the end, they deprived the bill of the two-thirds support needed to pass under a procedure for expediting uncontroversial legislation.

S. 2754 may not come up this year under the usual rules either, because opponents could attach H.R. 810 as a hostile amendment and doom the legislation again.

The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, which supported both H.R. 810 and S. 2754, criticized these tactics, saying that “one research path should not be held hostage to another.” But it seems H.R. 810’s House sponsors do not agree.

Fortunately President Bush says he will ensure funding of “alternatives” research by executive action. But it seems that some embryonic stem cell advocates are now committed to embryo destruction almost as an end in itself -- and they will attack competing roads to medical progress that do not raise this moral problem. That can’t be good for patients, or for the future of civil discourse on this issue.

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