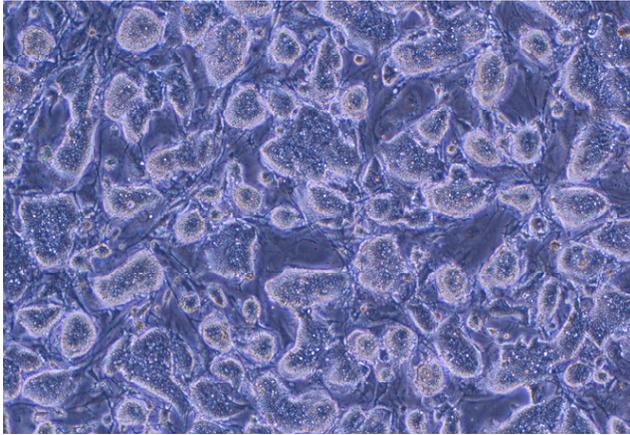


## Why Science Can't Save the GOP

by Michael Kinsley

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*Mouse stem cells.*

No one is happier than I am about the latest development in stem-cell research. Scientists in Japan and Wisconsin have independently figured out how to turn ordinary human skin cells into something like pluripotent stem cells. These are the cells that have caused so much excitement in recent years because they are like a biological gift certificate that can be turned into other kinds of cells as needed. These cells have also produced much controversy because they are derived from human embryos. I have the disease — Parkinson's — for which stem cells hold the most immediate promise. The hope is that

they can be turned into the type of brain cells that produce dopamine, the missing ingredient in Parkinson's patients.

The stem-cell announcement also brought happiness to many politicians, especially Republicans. It filled them with the hope that the whole messy issue could go away. If stem cells, or something like them, can be obtained without the use of embryos, that eliminates the supposed ethical problem that led President George W. Bush to ban almost all federal financing of embryonic-stem-cell research in 2001. The result has been a severe reduction in embryonic-stem-cell research. The issue has been agony for many Republicans, torn between the majority of voters, eager for the benefits of this scientific advance, and the small but intense minority who believe that a clump of a few dozen cells floating in a petri dish has the same human rights as you or I.

But any Republicans who think the stem-cell breakthrough gets them off the hook are going to end up very unhappy. This issue will not go away.

First, even the scientists who achieved the latest success believe strongly that embryonic-stem-cell research should continue. No one knows for sure whether the new method of producing pluripotent cells will pan out or where the next big developments will come from. We are still many thresholds away from anything that can be of practical value to me and others. Scientifically, it makes no sense to abandon any promising avenue just because another has opened up.

Second, even if this were a true turning point in stem-cell research, people like me are not going to quickly forget those six lost years. I am 56. Last year I had a kind of brain surgery that dramatically reduces the symptoms of Parkinson's. It received government approval only five years ago. Every year that goes by, science opens new doors, and every year, as you get older and your symptoms perhaps get worse, doors get shut. Six years of delay in a field moving as fast as stem-cell research means a lot of people for whom doors may not open until it is time for them to shut.

Third, although the political dilemma that stem cells pose for politicians is real enough, the moral dilemma is not and never was. The embryos used in stem-cell research come from fertility clinics, which otherwise would discard them. This has been a powerful argument in favor of such research. Why let these embryos go to waste? But a more important point is, What about fertility clinics themselves? In vitro fertilization ("test-tube babies") involves the purposeful creation of multiple embryos, knowing and intending that most of them either will die after implantation in the womb or, if not implanted, will be discarded or frozen indefinitely. Even if all embryonic-stem-cell research stopped tomorrow, this far larger mass slaughter of embryos would continue. There is no political effort to stop it. Bush even praised in vitro fertilization in his 2001 speech about the horrors of stem-cell research. In vitro has become too popular for politicians to take on. But their failure to do so makes a mockery of their alleged agony over embryonic stem cells.

Finally, the position a politician takes on an issue tells you something about his or her character, values and intellect. And that understanding doesn't disappear even if the issue itself does. Over the past six years, Bush and most Republicans in Congress have done their best to stop medical research that could cure many diseases, including one that I have. They claimed that morality and ethics required no less, yet they demonstrated by their indifference toward in vitro fertilization that they couldn't possibly be serious about this. Now they hope that science will spring them from the trap they walked into with full knowledge. Bush Administration apologists even say the President deserves credit because he directed research away from embryonic stem cells and encouraged scientists to look for more acceptable alternatives. In fact, the new research would not have been possible without the kind involving embryonic stem cells, which Bush believes is immoral.

The stem-cell issue is going away? 'Fraid not.