

Obama reverses Bush on stem cells

Scientists had charged the former administration with political interference.

By Linda Feldmann
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As promised during the campaign, President Obama has lifted federal restrictions on embryonic stem cell research put in place in 2001 by President Bush.

In announcing the policy change Monday morning, achieved by executive order, the president also signed a memorandum aimed at shielding the federal government's involvement in science from political influence.

The dual moves represented a sharp departure from the Bush years, when government employees – including the former Surgeon General – charged that politics was interfering with science in a range of areas, from stem cell research to climate change and reproductive health policy.

The policy moves, carried out Monday morning in an East Room signing ceremony, brought cheers from the scientific community and advocacy groups hoping for medical breakthroughs on a range of conditions.

Though Bush's policy on embryonic stem cell research was seen at the time as a compromise – in that it did allow federal funding of research on a limited number of existing lines – scientists asserted that the restrictions had effectively squelched federally based research. During that nearly eight-year period, research largely took place via state and private funding.

In his remarks, Mr. Obama himself referred to his predecessor's policy as a "ban," a characterization he repeated often during the presidential campaign. But his larger point – that the federal government will now "vigorously support" research – came through clearly.

"Today, with the executive order I am about to sign, we will bring the change that so many scientists and researchers, doctors and innovators, patients and loved ones have hoped for, and fought for, these past eight years: we will lift the ban on federal funding for promising embryonic stem cell research," Obama said. "We will vigorously support scientists who pursue this research. And we will aim for America to lead the world in the discoveries it one day may yield."

The change of policy added new fuel to the culture wars that have dogged the United States for decades. Though the nation's economic crisis and foreign wars have dominated policy debate, the battle over abortion simmers below the surface. Many, but not all, opponents of abortion also oppose embryonic stem cell research, because it involves the destruction of a human embryo.

Proponents of the research argue that the embryos already exist, having been created during fertility treatment, and in some cases would be discarded. A small percentage of leftover embryos do end up being adopted, and brought to term, in what are called "snowflake babies." But most embryos are not adopted.

The issue is politically problematic within the Republican Party; some prominent GOP opponents of abortion support federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research, arguing that the potential benefits outweigh the moral downside. Such Republicans include Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, who attended Monday's announcement, and Arizona Sen. John McCain, the GOP's 2008 presidential nominee.

But for antiabortion activists, Obama's move provided fresh fodder for their opposition to the new president. "I believe it is unethical to use human life, even young embryonic life, to advance science," said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, in a recent statement.

"While such research is unfortunately legal, taxpayers should not have to foot the bill for experiments that require the destruction of human life," Mr. Perkins said. "President Obama's policy change is especially troubling given the significant adult stem cell advances that are being used to treat patients now without harming or destroying human embryos."

Some bioethicists also argue that Obama is giving short shrift to the strides made in recent years with adult stem cells and other techniques not derived from human embryos. "It seems to me that what's going on here is more about politics; it's more about fighting the abortion battle through stem cell research," says Charles Camosy, an assistant professor of Christian ethics at Fordham University in New York. "What gets lost is the science and how best to help people and how best to allocate resources in an economy like we have."

Still, a cheer went up Monday from proponents of embryonic stem cell research. "It is time for our elected leaders to finally put progress before politics on this issue and remove all of the remaining unnecessary limitations on human embryonic stem cell research that is conducted using the best ethical and medical practices," said Susan Solomon, CEO of the New York Stem Cell Foundation, in a statement.

New federal funding of embryonic stem cell research will not begin immediately. The National Institutes of Health has 120 days to work out guidelines to assess requests for funding and to address the ethical issues such research raises.