

Obama Issues Executive Order To Lift Some Federal Restrictions On Embryonic Stem Cell Research

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President Obama on Monday at an event with Democratic and Republican lawmakers is expected to announce that he will reverse restrictions put in place by former President George W. Bush on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, in keeping with campaign promises to "separate science and politics," the [New York Times](#) reports. Although the decision to reverse the restrictions is "not surprising," it is "nonetheless of great interest, involving a long-controversial intersection of science and personal moral beliefs," the *Times* reports (Stout/Harris, *New York Times*, 3/7). According to the [Washington Post](#), Bush imposed restrictions in August 2001 that limited federal funding to studies involving stem cell lines that were already in existence -- about 21 lines. By lifting the restrictions, Obama will "allow thousands of scientists to study hundreds" of stem cell lines that have been developed during the last eight years, the *Post* reports. Researchers also will be able to "dismantle cumbersome bureaucracies constructed to work around the constraints and let them exchange scientific ideas more easily," the *Post* reports (Stein, *Washington Post*, 3/7).

Obama's announcement that he intends to lift the restrictions "is not likely to lead to any immediate change in government policy," the *Times* reports. It may take many months for NIH to develop new guidelines for the research, but advocates are expected "to push for the process to go as quickly as possible" so universities can have adequate time to submit grant proposals before September 2010, when NIH must give out the last of the \$10.4 billion allotted to the agency in the economic stimulus law.

The *Times* reports that discussion surrounding embryonic stem cell research has "often been deeply personal as well as scientific." Many scientists believe that embryonic stem cells could offer new treatments for diseases like diabetes, Parkinson's and heart disease, or be used to treat things like spinal cord injuries, because of their ability to develop into any type of cell in the body. Opponents of the research argue that human embryos are "nothing less than tiny human beings" and that using them for research purposes is "akin to murder," the *Times* reports (*New York Times*, 3/7). House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) said the "question is whether taxpayer dollars should be used to subsidize the destruction of precious human life." He added, "Millions of Americans strongly oppose that, and rightfully so" (Kaplan/Levey, [Los Angeles Times](#), 3/7).

Some opponents also argue that scientists can conduct research on non-embryonic stem cells, such as those taken from the placenta or found in amniotic fluid (*New York Times*, 3/7). The *Post* reports that many researchers say it is "crucial" to study embryonic cell lines in addition to others because it is "far from clear which cells will ultimately lead to the most important advances" (*Washington Post*, 3/7).

Critics of the Bush policy have long argued that the cells permitted to be studied under the former policy have "shortcomings," with many having defects that could make them dangerous for implantation. Amy Comstock Rick of the [Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research](#) -- which lobbied for policy change -- said that Obama's decision is "huge" and that it is "eight years overdue to have human embryonic stem cell research put back in place with other forms of research for patients in this country." Lawrence Soler of the [Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation](#) said that lifting the restrictions is "what the patient community, the scientific community and the medical community has been asking for." He added, "We need to give credit to the administration for living up to their promise

to keep politics out of science" (*Washington Post*, 3/7). Curt Civin, director of the University of Maryland Center for Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine, said, "We've got eight years of science to make up for. Now the silly restrictions are lifted." Harold Varmus, chair of the White House's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, said researchers "view what happened" under the Bush administration as a "manifestation of failure to think carefully about how federal support of science and the use of scientific advice occurs" (Elliott, *AP/USA Today*, 3/9).

The *Post* reports that using federal funds to destroy human embryos will still be prohibited under federal law. However, some researchers hope that funding will be allowed for work on cell lines taken from embryos created specifically for their stem cells, rather than just using embryos leftover from fertility treatments. George Daley, a leading stem cell researcher at [Children's Hospital Boston](#), said researchers are "waiting to see what the details of the policy will be." He added that the new policy "would be a very restricted course and exclude some very important lines" if only frozen IVF embryos were permitted." Mark Kay, a Stanford University researcher, said he does not "personally have any problem" with creating embryos for research but said it would be "reasonable" for Obama to limit funding to only IVF embryos that are destined to be discarded. He said, "It's really mind-boggling to me these things are going to be discarded and scientists haven't been allowed to use them to do research" (*Washington Post*, 3/7).

According to the *New York Times*, one of the biggest questions had been if Obama would reverse the Bush policy through an executive order or wait to pursue legislation to make the policy change permanent. A remaining issue is whether the so-called Dickey-Wicker amendment -- which first became law in 1996 and specifically bans the use of tax dollars to create human embryos or for research in which embryos are destroyed, discarded or knowingly subjected to risk of injury -- will remain on the books (*New York Times*, 3/7). Rep. Diana DeGette (D-Colo.) wrote two pieces of legislation -- in 2005 and 2007 -- to allow federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, both of which were vetoed by Bush. Kristofer Eisenla, a spokesperson for DeGette, said she might pursue a bill that would codify Obama's policy change. He said that DeGette also is interested in an "uber stem cell bill" that would address concerns surrounding the research, including establishing ethical guidelines for NIH-funded research. Carl Tobia, a University of Richmond law professor, said he thinks a law would be "preferable to having this always back and forth by way of executive order" (Riley, *Denver Post*, 3/7). According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Obama has said he would sign such a bill if it passed by Congress (*Los Angeles Times*, 3/7).

According to the *Post*, Obama when lifting the embryonic stem cell restrictions also will issue a presidential memorandum "aimed at insulating scientific decisions across the federal government from political influence." Obama "believes that it's particularly important to sign this memorandum so that we can put science and technology back at the heart of pursuing a broad range of national goals," Melody Barnes, director of Obama's Domestic Policy Council, said.

Officials would not go into details, but the memorandum will order the Office of Science and Technology Policy to "assure a number of effective standards and practices that will help our society feel that we have the highest-quality individuals carrying out scientific jobs and that information is shared with the public," Varmus said. He added that the memorandum will ensure that "people who are appointed to federal positions in science have strong credentials and that the vetting process for evaluating scientific information doesn't lead to any undermining of the scientific opinion" (Stein, *Washington Post*, 3/9).

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