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EDITORIAL

The Rules on Stem Cells

No sooner had President Obama lifted the Bush-era restrictions on financing embryonic stem cell research than critics began urging that any federal support be limited to work with stem cells derived from surplus embryos at fertility clinics. That would be a mistake. The guidelines should define the eligible research as broadly as possible to allow the greatest potential for advances.

Some of the most important research requires stem cells genetically matched to patients with specific diseases, such as Parkinson's or diabetes. These can rarely be identified in the huge stock of surplus embryos.

President Bush limited scientists to 21 stem cell lines derived from surplus embryos before mid-2001. Congress twice passed bills to allow potentially thousands more lines from surplus embryos to be used. Mr. Bush vetoed them. (Hundreds of stem cell lines have been created around the world, all or virtually all from surplus embryos.)

This single-minded focus on the surplus embryos — left over after patients' fertility treatments were completed — was mostly because a strong moral argument could be made that these microscopic, days-old embryos were doomed to be discarded anyway. Why not gain potential medical benefits from studying their stem cells?

Now President Obama seems open to the possibility of moving beyond the surplus embryos. His announcement placed few boundaries on stem cell research beyond requiring it to be scientifically worthy, responsibly conducted and compliant with the law.

He gave the National Institutes of Health free rein to devise guidelines governing what kinds of research can be supported and what ethical strictures will be placed on it.

Let us hope that the N.I.H. broadens the range of stem cells that can be studied.

Scientists believe that one way to obtain the matched cells needed to study diseases is to use a cell from an adult afflicted with that disease to create a genetically matched embryo and extract its stem cells. This approach — known as somatic cell nuclear transfer — is difficult, and no one has yet done it.

Another approach — known as induced pluripotent stem cells — has shown that adult skin cells can be converted back to a state resembling embryonic stem cells without ever creating or destroying an embryo. Some experts think that approach may be the most promising, for moral and practical reasons.

Even so, work on genetically matched embryonic stem cells would still be important. They may be the best

way to study the earliest stages of a disease, or prove superior for other purposes. They will almost certainly be needed as a standard to judge the value of the induced pluripotent cells.

When the N.I.H. sets the rules for federally financed research, the main criterion should be whether a proposal has high scientific merit.

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