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EDITORIAL: Fix federal law on stem cell research

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By Register Editorial Staff

If total ban on use of embryos stands, research that could aid millions may stall.

The U.S. Justice Department may win an appeal of a federal judge's ruling cutting off federal aid for embryonic stem cell research, but the real solution is changing the law that has thrown up the roadblock to the research.

Passed in 1996, and renewed annually by Congress, the Dickey-Wicker Amendment bars federal aid that results in the destruction of human embryos. In 2001, the Bush administration limited federal aid to a small number of existing stem cell lines created from embryos. The Obama administration had expanded the aid to many more stem cell lines, drawing a distinction between the work creating the stem cell line and the research using cells from it.

If it stands, the judge's ruling might effectively shut down embryonic stem cell research holding great therapeutic promise. Instead, the research and therapies would be developed overseas, in countries with less restrictive policies.

In practice, the ruling does not mean embryonic stem cell research will come to a screeching halt. The National Institutes of Health has told researchers they can continue to use the \$131 million in grants received this year. However, \$54 million in grants will be withheld. They were due to be awarded this month for 22 projects.

Because of the federal restrictions, much of the embryonic stem cell research has been conducted with state and private money. Such work is not affected by the judge's ruling.

Connecticut, for example, has committed \$100 million to embryonic stem cell research. Of that, \$50 million has been awarded so far to more than 100 research projects at the University of Connecticut and Yale and Wesleyan universities.

State researchers are using stem cells to grow replacement cartilage and doing research that could lead to therapies for epilepsy and childhood leukemia. Stem cell lines created by University of Connecticut scientists will remain available for research.

There are strict ethical guidelines for the use of embryos, which are microscopic clusters of cells. The embryos used are those that would otherwise be discarded or left in storage at fertility clinics. They cannot be used without the consent of the egg and sperm donors. There is no payment for the embryo's use.

Work with adult stem cells is also promising, and has led to successful therapies. But, adult stem cells do not have the ability of embryonic stem cells to multiply indefinitely, and they are limited to replicating the cells of the tissue of the organ from which they are taken.

Ending federal aid for embryonic stem cell research will delay or end work that may lead to alleviating the suffering of millions. It would likely drive much of the work to countries that understand not only its potential therapeutic value, but the enormous economic impact of creating a new medical industry.

Neither alternative should be acceptable to Americans.

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bob wrote on Sep 5, 2010 6:26 AM:

" The question is simple. Do we use adult stem cells to look fo rnew medical technologies? Or do we kill human life to see if there are other oppotunities for medical research? Where do we set the limits? "

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kma wrote on Sep 5, 2010 9:41 AM:

" "Neither alternative should be acceptable to Americans."

Actually what is not acceptable to this American is using tax dollars to fund research that should be

paid for by the industries that will benefit most from it. That \$100 Million of Connecticut taxes is going to university professors who then ignore their real job of teaching and being there for students. "

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Michael J. Church wrote on Sep 5, 2010 11:25 AM:

" Okay, when do we start banning IVF treatments? They regularly discard embryos and no one thinks twice about it. "

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bob wrote on Sep 5, 2010 11:39 AM:

" MJ, many people think about it and quite frankly are disgusted by the lack of concern for discarding human life during IVF. Perhaps you do not. "

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But wrote on Sep 5, 2010 12:39 PM:

" the loudest opponents of stem cell research are willfully silent on IVF. Could this be yet another ideological position that is not supported by logic?

OMG I think I discovered the Conservative mantra. "

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