

JONATHAN D. MORENO AND RICK WEISS

The Boston Globe

GOP wants to close stem cell lab doors

By Jonathan D. Moreno and Rick Weiss | September 15, 2008

STEM CELL research was one issue that many observers thought would fly under the radar in this year's presidential election. Both candidates have expressed support for research on cell lines from frozen embryos already destined for destruction. Senator John McCain even joined with Senator Barack Obama in voting for legislation that would have loosened President Bush's stem cell research restrictions. And until recently it appeared that the ultraconservative GOP base would give McCain a pass on the issue.

But American politics is nothing if not unpredictable. Just before completing its work two weeks ago, the Republican platform committee was persuaded to change this sentence: "We call for a ban on human cloning and a ban on the creation of **and** experimentation on human embryos for research purposes" to this sentence: "We call for a ban on human cloning and a ban on the creation of **or** experimentation on human embryos for research purposes." (Our emphases.)

In case it's been a while since your last logic course, here's how the first sentence translates: We call for a ban on human cloning, and creating human embryos for experimentation/research purposes. And here's how the second sentence parses: We call for a ban on human cloning, and the creation of human embryos for research purposes, and experimentation on human embryos.

The last clause of the second sentence, adopted by the platform committee after an impassioned appeal by one delegate, goes beyond even Bush's arbitrary and counterproductive current limits on federal funding. It would ban all embryonic stem cell research, period. The platform would also end embryonic stem cell research using private or state funds, again going much further than the Bush policy. It would even call into question research on infertility.

How did the Republicans get themselves into this box? An uncharitable explanation is that some of them, at least, didn't understand the logical implications of the subtle word change. But some clearly did, and were none too pleased. "We should not be in the business of prohibiting therapeutic research," antiabortion activist James Bopp said during the platform committee's meeting, in a failed attempt to prevent the switch from "and" to "or." Yet that is just what the committee did. In adopting the new language, the platform drafters succumbed to the farthest right of the party's base. What the radicals couldn't get from Bush's arbitrary position on the stem cell issue, they got from the Republican Platform Committee.

Ironically, just as the drafting group was being hijacked, a group of Harvard scientists reported a breakthrough in turning ordinary pancreas cells into more specialized insulin-producing cells, the kind that diabetics need. The work grew out of insights into gene regulation and cell specialization gleaned in part from recent studies on embryonic stem cells.

Sarah Palin's addition to the Republican ticket has only added to the irony of the platform language. That's because just this year, stem cell scientists made a major advance in their quest to understand Down syndrome, which affects Palin's youngest child: For the first time, they isolated and cultivated a line of human embryonic stem cells that harbor the exact chromosomal aberration that causes the syndrome. That in turn has granted researchers an unprecedented view into how that genetic glitch triggers Down syndrome's well-known array of physical and cognitive abnormalities.

With those mechanisms now visible for the first time, scientists said, they can start to envision treatments that could at least reduce some of those deficits in newborns or young children with the syndrome - treatments that even the most accepting and loving mother of a baby with Down syndrome would probably accept with gratitude if available.

Do McCain and Palin appreciate that the new research in diabetes and Down syndrome, not to mention similar recent advances for other diseases, simply could not have proceeded without the lessons being learned from embryonic stem cells? Apparently their party's platform writers don't.

So who's in charge of Republican policy on this important question, and what exactly would the policy on stem cell research be in a McCain presidency? These are questions worth asking this fall.

Jonathan Moreno is the David and Lyn Silfen university professor of bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. He and Rick Weiss are senior fellows at the Center for American Progress Action Fund. ■