

The Embryo Debate

The controversy over stem cells and genetic research has confused many of us. But Christians must uphold the biblical mandate to protect life.

Stem cell research, a fast-growing field in biological science, has pioneered a promising and unique approach to wellness: Healthy cells can be regenerated in the body to aid in healing diseases and repairing injuries. Yet advances in the field during the last 20 years also have created the equivalent of an evil twin: the use of stem cells from human embryos in experimental treatments and research.

Many Christians, physicians and scientific researchers believe that using embryonic stem cells for therapy or research poses a moral and ethical threat to the sanctity of human life.

Like other expanding areas in science, embryonic research is raising questions as rapidly as it's generating new discoveries. Do historical ethical guidelines adequately address emerging technologies? Has God's Word commanded limits on our use of the human body for research—even if healing is the goal? Is the use of human embryos tantamount to murder—and if so, is it being actually condoned in branches of modern medicine for "the greater good" of humanity?

Christians are oftentimes confused by the many dissenting opinions they hear. Many of us do not even know what stem cells are or what all the debate is about. Yet, as believers, we ought to be able to accurately assess this new and exciting field of science so we can discern when to uphold God's mandate to protect life. But to do this, we first need to become informed.

Stem Cells: What Are They?

Each organ and form of tissue in our bodies is made up of cells. Most of these cells are quite specialized.

They have developed unique characteristics that help them do their jobs as, say, a muscle cell, a red blood cell or a brain cell. For example, if you view a muscle cell under a microscope, you will see it looks quite different from a skin cell.

A stem cell, by distinction, is a nonspecialized cell. It has not yet developed the final characteristics that a mature cell has. A stem cell is still in a stage of growth at which it can develop into any type of cell.

There are different sources for stem cells—and here is where the controversy starts. All of us have stem cells in our bodies. These are called “adult” stem cells. If these cells are taken from one part of your body and placed in another part, they have the potential to turn into specialized cells.

For instance, if stem cells are taken from bone marrow and put into the brain, they have the potential to turn into brain cells. They don't always do that, however, which is why more research is needed.

Moreover, there is no ethical issue with the use of adult stem cells, as no life is deliberately lost through the transference process. In fact, this capability of adult stem cells to regenerate as healthy specialized cells has yielded some tremendous success stories in the treatment of Parkinson's disease and the repair of spinal-cord injuries.

In particular, stem cells are very abundant in the umbilical cord and placenta—the organ that attaches the baby in the womb to the mother and supplies nutrients from the mother to the child. In modern medicine, stem cells from the placenta are extracted and used elsewhere but no destruction of human life occurs in this process, as the placenta and umbilical cord are unnecessary after birth takes place.

New Threat to the Unborn

The early human embryo is also a stem cell. After the sperm and the egg unite into a single cell, the DNA from both combine to form a genetically unique individual. This cell is called a zygote and is at that stage a nonspecialized cell—by definition, a stem cell.

But it divides rapidly, and within days the subsequent cells begin to differentiate. Tissues and organs form and develop, and over nine months' time the baby forms.

When an embryo is used in stem cell research, it dies. For this reason, people who believe that life begins at conception, not just when the baby is born, maintain that destruction of embryos for the sake of research—or even for the more noble purpose of medical treatment—is wrong.

They contend that a human life has been destroyed in the process. Christianity has a long history and ethical norm of valuing embryonic life.

Interestingly, to date, no clinical successes with embryo-derived stem cells have been reported. In fact, some people

who have been treated with stem cells taken from embryos have had severe immunological side effects. Some have died. There is also a theoretically higher risk of cancer developing from embryonically derived stem cells. Could it be that God does not honor the destruction of innocent life, no matter how small or undeveloped?

Considering then the ethical concerns about using embryonic stem cells, the greater risk to the patient receiving these cells, and the lack of clinical success when using them, who would want to use them? The answer is, primarily those motivated by survival or money. They include:

The desperate. People with horrible diseases or injuries often will grasp at any cure. They might be too desperately ill to care about the ethical issues, or they at least view them as secondary to recovering their health. And they may not recognize the humanity in an embryo, which does not look like much of a human being and has no voice to speak in defense of itself.

The uninformed. Many people simply have no idea that different types of stem cells and stem cell research exist. They aren't aware that embryonic stem cell research has never produced a cure or that it can make one susceptible to malignancies. Many are not even aware that an embryo is a genetically complete person.

Scientists with agendas. Large sums of money can be made from patenting stem cell lines. Moreover, many scientists are eager to do things simply because they can be done, without regard to laws and ethics. A chilling editorial in the July 2004 British medical journal *The Lancet* denounced the role of "deeply held beliefs" in medicine and called on scientists to

dissuade the public from interfering with research for unscientific and religious reasons.

Abortion lobbyists. Many who advocate abortion rights see embryonic stem cell research as an area for potential legal challenges. They are fearful that if any laws protecting embryos within the context of research are passed, they might later be used to defend the innocent in the womb against abortion. This multimillion-dollar industry has many powerful and high-paid lobbyists.

The humanist. An astounding number of people believe that the embryo has no value. Former Sen. John Danforth of Missouri told Episcopal Life newspaper in September 2005: "When we see an opportunity to save our neighbors' lives through stem cell research, we believe that it is our duty to pursue that research and to oppose legislation that would impede us from doing so." Being unwanted by human parents does not devalue someone in God's eyes, as Jesus revealed when He warned against despising the "little ones" (see Matt. 18:10).

Hitler's scientists used vivisection (dissecting living people), and experimented on the unwilling, the unvalued and the despised. Yet no medical advancements came forth. Could it be that God, who created all things, created a morality or moral limitation in science that we have ignored?

What You Can Do

Each of us has an individual responsibility, as Christians, to seek the protection of the innocent and defenseless, be they the elderly, the infirm or handicapped, children, or the unborn. I encourage you to take one of the following steps and

get started!

Pray. Ephesians 6:12 tells us that we don't contend against flesh and blood but against spiritual powers of evil. Most people who are active in promoting embryonic stem cell research desire good things for humanity but are ignorant of the value God sets on the tiny and defenseless.

They are unaware He has the power and desire to heal. They are blinded as 2 Corinthians 4:4 describes, and we need to do spiritual warfare in prayer so that they can see.

Educate. Most people don't know the medical risks associated with embryonic stem cell therapy or that it has never produced a cure. Many others don't know that embryonic and adult stem cell research are two entirely different things.

Write. Many of our elected officials want to represent their constituents fairly. Although some have a clearly defined agenda, all are sensitive to public pressure and opinion, even if it comes in the form of a letter. Many politicians who say they are pro-life have in fact caved on this issue because of overwhelming pressure from the opposition side.

We should explore the wonderful world God created and the mechanisms for healing that He installed, but let us not forget that He loves the smallest, the weakest and the most vulnerable among us.

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The Truth About In Vitro Fertilization

Embryos created in laboratories develop into healthy children. They deserve to be treated with sanctity.

In vitro fertilization is a technique used by couples who are not able to have children by ordinary means. Sperm from the potential father and eggs from the potential birth mother are combined in a carefully controlled laboratory environment, and embryos develop just as they would in the uterus. These embryos are capable of developing into healthy children under the right circumstances.

Sometimes Christian couples will go through the in vitro process intending--because of their pro-life commitment--to use every viable embryo they produce. But, as you know, life can be unpredictable: Death, illness, divorce or financial problems can impair the best of intentions.

The result is that fertilized embryos are created in vitro that aren't likely to be implanted or to develop into a baby--whether those embryos come from Christians who believe in the sanctity of life or from non-Christian couples who do not have a pro-life belief system. In vitro fertilization, in fact, always produces many more viable embryos than is practical for implanting in a single womb. These extra little beings are referred to as "excess embryos" in the terms of embryonic stem cell research.

So what becomes of them? To the shame of our society most of them are destroyed. As Christians, we believe these embryos

are human beings and that to dispose of them is the equivalent of killing. It is a form of murder not unlike abortion.

To help prevent some of this needless destruction, the Christian Medical & Dental Associations has created the National Embryo Donation Center, where excess embryos may be sent and from which embryos may be obtained for women (or couples) who want to save these embryos. A little-known fact is that the number of people eagerly waiting to adopt embryos is much higher than the number of people attempting to donate them.

For more information, write the National Embryo Donation Center at 10810 Parkside Drive, Suite 304, Knoxville, TN 37934; call 865-218-6600; or visit the organization online at .