

RELIGIOUS HEALTH RESTRICTIONS

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Religious Opposition Threatens Medical Research

How is religious opposition affecting stem cell research?

Scientists conducting research utilizing embryonic stem cells have seen promising results that may lead to treatments for such diseases as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and juvenile diabetes. Embryonic stem cells are far more useful for medical research than are other types of stem cells because of their potential to grow into any cell or organ found in the human body.

Anti-choice religious groups are targeting stem cell research, therapeutic cloning, genetic screening, assisted reproductive technology and even vaccines.

Christopher Reeve, an activist for those with spinal cord injuries, has said embryonic stem cell research opens "one of the most promising lines of inquiry that research medicine has ever developed."

Scientists obtain embryonic stem cells either from the estimated 400,000 leftover embryos in infertility clinics (which are donated by couples and would otherwise be discarded) or through therapeutic cloning, which produces blastocysts (pre-embryos) in petri dishes specifically to be used for medical research into cures.

But religious organizations describing themselves as "pro life" are trying to prohibit or limit this research, argu-

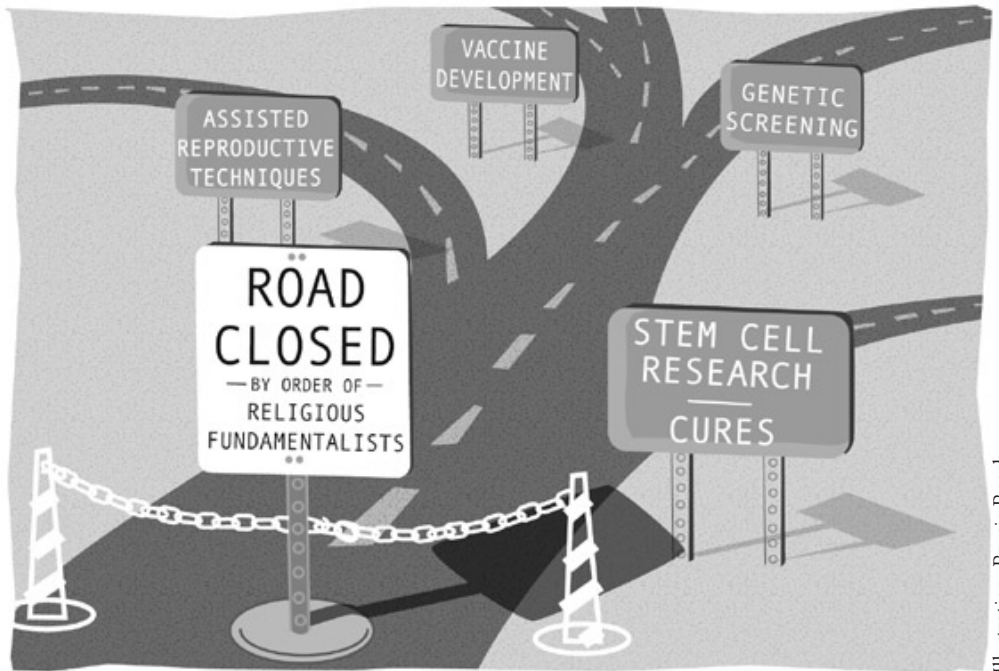


Illustration: Bruce Rosch

ing that embryos should not be used for research purposes, even when the resulting treatments could save lives.

Reproductive rights and medical research: Their shared opponents

Anti-choice religious organizations have taken their battle over reproductive rights well beyond opposition to abortion in recent years.

For example, they have opposed the provision of emergency contraception (EC) to rape victims out of the belief (scientifically unproven) that EC might cause the destruction of a fertilized egg, or zygote. Many of these organizations also consider biogenetic advances such as embryonic stem cell research, cloning, assisted reproductive techniques, genetic screening and the development of new vaccines to be "pro life" issues.

Their opposition is based on their determination to protect what they call "pre-born" life, which includes not only a fetus, but also a blastocyst or zygote. They make no distinction between therapeutic cloning (creating embryonic cells solely for medical research into potential cures) and reproductive cloning (designed to create new human beings). Examples of the links between anti-abortion activity and opposition to biogenetic advances include the following:

- The "Pro-Life Activities" page of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops website covers topics that include not only abortion, but also cloning, contraception, embryo research, emergency contraception, fetal research, in vitro fertilization and stem cell research.

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- The anti-choice organizations Children of God and Human Life International bought enough stock in Merck, a pharmaceutical company, to introduce a shareholder resolution to stop Merck from manufacturing vaccines that are grown on culture mediums derived from fetal cells. Although the resolution was ultimately rejected by shareholders, this type of activism is an emerging tactic of anti-choice groups.
- US anti-choice groups supported a United Nations treaty that would have banned all forms of cloning, both therapeutic and reproductive, globally.

What problems can be caused by enactment of legislation that creates legal protections for embryos?

Advocates for both reproductive rights and biogenetic research need to carefully monitor any proposed legislation that would elevate the status of embryos or use religiously-based definitions of when life begins. Examples include "Unborn Victims of Violence" bills, laws that define

life as beginning at conception and bans on all types of cloning. Many of those proposals are designed to lay the legal groundwork for banning abortion, contraception, emergency contraception and research using human embryos by recognizing embryos as persons with full legal rights and protections.

How are religious principles being infused into public policy?

Fundamentalist religious principles are finding their way into public policies through scientific committee appointments and charters, federal funding policies and regulatory and policy changes which often go unnoticed by the general public and popular press. For example, the charter of the Federal Secretary's Advisory Committee on Human Research Protections, a committee that advises the Department of Health and Human Services, was revised in 2002 to include embryos as subjects whose welfare needed to be considered when doing research on human subjects. This change has concerned advocates in the scientific research and infertility fields, who fear it may restrict research into infertility treatments, assisted reproductive techniques and scientific research.

Could religious restrictions limit patients' ability to obtain new medical treatments?

Because of the Catholic Bishops' opposition to medical research using embryonic stem cells, it is likely that treatments derived from this research would be banned at the more than 500 Catholic-

affiliated hospitals in the United States. The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, which govern care at Catholic hospitals, state (in Directive 66) that "Catholic health care institutions should not make use of human tissue obtained by direct abortions even for research or therapeutic purposes."

How can public policies protect scientific research?

President George Bush has limited federally funded stem cell research to embryonic stem cell lines created on or before Aug. 9, 2001. In order to encourage privately funded stem cell research to progress, California and New Jersey have passed legislation allowing therapeutic cloning for medical research, through the process known as somatic cell nuclear transfer. Both states banned cloning for reproductive purposes. A similar bill (the Cloning Prohibition and Research Protection Act) has been introduced in the New York State Legislature.

How can attempts to limit research and access to medical services be successfully opposed?

The pro-choice and biogenetic research communities need to work together to formulate strategies to preserve both medical research and the rights of individuals to make medical decisions in conformance with their own ethical and moral beliefs. To learn more, contact the MergerWatch Project at 212-261-4314 or lois@mergerwatch.org



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