



Capitol Comments: Adult Stem Cell Research: The (Ethical) Future of Stem Cell Treatment and Research

By Andrew Rivas, Executive Director, Texas Catholic Conference

We've heard a lot of about stem cell research in the last few weeks, and the research is the topic of several bills in the State Legislature. In fact, funding for stem cell research was one of several issues that our over 400 Catholic advocates discussed at the Capitol during our Life and Family Life Advocacy day. While there seems to be a lot of controversy over the issue of stem cell research, a careful look shows that there is a clear, ethical future of stem cell research through the use of adult stem cells.

If you were a budding researcher and you were given the opportunity to work in a field that has produced cures, treatments, and has saved thousands of lives, or a field that has, since its inception over twenty years ago, been unable to produce a single cure, which field would you choose? If you were footing the bill, which field would you fund?

The answer is simple: support research that has proven to be successful--adult stem cell research.

There are two types of stem cell research, adult and embryonic. Adult stem cells can be obtained from adults, children, and even the placenta and umbilical cord without any damage to the donor. Embryonic stem cells, on the other hand, are derived from the human embryo. In the process of obtaining these embryonic stem cells, the young human life is killed. Therefore, any form of embryonic stem cell research, regardless of the source of the embryo, is both unethical and immoral as it denies a young human his or her most basic right--the right to life.

Adult stem cells, on the other hand, can be obtained without harm to the donor and without any ethical problem, and these have already demonstrated great medical promise. Thousands of lives have been saved by adult stem cells—most often in the form of "bone marrow transplants" for leukemia and other conditions. Today, adult stem cells are being used to help people with Parkinson's disease, many kinds of cancer, spinal cord injury, sickle-cell anemia, heart damage, corneal damage, and dozens of other conditions.

Years ago it was said that stem cells from embryos would be the most useful because they are so fast-growing and versatile, able to make virtually any kind of cell. But those advantages become disadvantages when these cells make tumors, creating a condition worse than the disease. Embryonic stem cells have never treated a human patient, and animal trials suggest that they are too genetically unstable and too likely to form lethal tumors to be used for treatment any time soon.

Supporters disappointed at failures using embryonic stem cells sometimes try to defend the lack of treatment or cures from embryonic stem cell research by claiming that there is a federal ban on this type of research. This is a false claim because embryonic stem cell research is fully allowed in the United States—there is no federal law (and almost no state law) against it.

State funding for the Texas Cord Blood Bank is an excellent example of how state dollars for adult stem cell research are curing people now. The Texas Cord Blood Bank is a division of the

South Texas Blood & Tissue Center in San Antonio. The Texas Legislature created the nonprofit program in 2001 to establish a statewide cord blood bank. Cord blood donations from this bank have saved lives.

The Texas Legislature has several bills that would restrict state funding and university research to adult stem cell research. Budget provisions requiring that state funding support this ethically and morally responsible research is simply another way of ensuring that Texas continues to fund ethically and morally responsible adult stem cell research--research that is producing cures and treatments.

For more information, visit www.TXcatholic.org.