

Adult Stem Cell Research

Stem cells from adult tissues and umbilical cord blood are now known to be much more versatile than once thought. These cells are now in widespread use to treat many kinds of cancer and other illnesses, and in clinical trials they have already benefited patients suffering from heart disease, corneal damage, sickle-cell anemia, multiple sclerosis, and many other devastating conditions. Researchers have even developed new non-destructive methods for producing cells with the properties of embryonic stem cells—for example, by “reprogramming” adult cells. There is no moral objection to research and therapy of this kind, when it involves no harm to human beings at any stage of development and is conducted with appropriate informed consent. (*USCCB, On Embryonic Stem Cell Research, June 2008*)

Church teaching

- ★ Let us be clear—we are not opposed to stem cell research, only that stem cell research that kills human embryos. We fully support adult stem cell research since it does not take the life of the donor and we ask our legislature to help these morally acceptable efforts. (*Catholic Bishops of Texas, Statement on Human Embryos and Human Cloning, May 23, 2005*)
- ★ Research [involving the destruction of human embryos]...is not truly at the service of humanity....History itself has condemned such a science in the past and will condemn it in the future, not only because it lacks the light of God but also because it lacks humanity. (*Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Participants in the Pontifical Academy for Life Symposium on "Stem Cells: What Future for Therapy?", September 16, 2006*)
- ★ Any treatment which claims to save human lives, yet is based upon the destruction of human life in its embryonic state, is logically and morally contradictory, as is any production of human embryos for the direct or indirect purpose of experimentation or eventual destruction. (*Pope John Paul II, Address to the members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, November 10, 2003*)
- ★ The law cannot tolerate - indeed it must expressly forbid - that human beings, even at the embryonic stage, should be treated as objects of experimentation, be mutilated or destroyed with the excuse that they are superfluous or incapable of developing normally. (*Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, The Gift of Life*)

Resources

- ★ **Texas Catholic Conference** Stem Cell Research page (www.TXcatholic.org/ESCR.asp)
- ★ **US Conference of Catholic Bishops** Stem Cell page (www.USCCB.org/prolife/issues/bioethic)
- ★ **National Catholic Bioethics Center** (www.NCBCenter.org)
- ★ **Pontifical Academy for Life** (www.AcademiaVita.org)

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The Texas Catholic Conference (TCC) is the association of the 15 Roman Catholic dioceses of the State of Texas, and is the Official Public Policy Voice of the Catholic Bishops of Texas.

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The Texas Catholic Conference supports adult stem cell research, which does not involve the destruction of human life and in fact has been used to treat thousands of people.

What is a stem cell? A stem cell is a relatively unspecialized cell that, when it divides, can do two things: make another cell like itself, or make any of a number of cells with more specialized functions. For example, just one kind of stem cell in our blood can make new red blood cells, or white blood cells, or other kinds—depending on what the body needs. These cells are like the stem of a plant that spreads out in different directions as it grows.

The Church supports stem cell research derived from cells obtained from adult tissue, umbilical cord blood, and other sources that pose no moral problem. Useful stem cells have been found in bone marrow, blood, muscle, fat, nerves, and even in the pulp of baby teeth. Some of these cells are already being used to treat people with a wide variety of diseases. The Church opposes stem cell research using the embryo because harvesting these stem cells kills the living human embryo. The Church opposes the direct destruction of innocent human life for any purpose, including research.

Has research using adult stem cells ever accomplished anything? Thousands of lives have been saved by adult stem cells—most often in the form of "bone marrow transplants" for leukemia and other conditions (where the active ingredient in the bone marrow is stem cells). Today, adult stem cells have been used to help people with Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injury, sickle-cell anemia, heart damage, corneal damage, and dozens of other conditions. The danger is that this progress toward cures will be halted or slowed by campaigns that divert attention and resources toward embryonic stem cell research.

Embryonic stem cells have never been used to treat 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. 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. Supporters disappointed at failures using these cells sometimes blame this stem cell research "ban" (which is not really a ban at all). But as noted above, the much more serious obstacle lies in the nature of the cells, which are not working out as some predicted.

If some human embryos will remain in frozen storage and ultimately be discarded anyway, why is it wrong to try to get some good out of them? In the end we will all die anyway, but that gives no one a right to kill us. In any case, these embryos will not die because they are inherently unable to survive, but because others are choosing to hand them over for destructive research instead of letting them implant in their mother's womb. One wrong choice does not justify an additional wrong choice to kill them for research, much less a choice to make taxpayers support such destruction. The idea of experimenting on human beings because they may die anyway also poses a grave threat to convicted prisoners, terminally ill patients, and others.

Is the Church telling us to choose the lives of embryos over the lives of suffering patients? No. It is calling us to respect both, without discrimination. We must help those who are suffering, but we may not use a good end to justify an evil means. Moreover, treatments that do not require destroying any human life are at least as promising—they are already healing some conditions, and are far closer to healing other conditions than any approach using embryonic stem cells. The choice is not between science and ethics, but between science that is ethically responsible and science that is not.

ⁱ "Stem Research and Human Cloning: Questions and Answers." [Pro-Life Activities](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/bioethic). U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. <<http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/bioethic>>.