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What is the Stem Cell Debate Really About?

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Two possible breakthroughs in human stem cell research were announced Sunday in *Nature*, one of the world's most respected scientific journals. In "['Ethical' Routes to Stem Cells highlight Political Divide](#)," [Erika Check](#) and [Carina Dennis](#) report that scientists have developed two techniques for deriving pluripotent human stem cells that do not require the destruction of a human embryo.

As the journal reports: *Religious and ethical concerns are forcing researchers using human embryonic stem cells to seek ways to sidestep these issues. In a first attempt, biologists this week revealed details of two techniques for deriving the cells that do not involve the destruction of a viable embryo. Both methods work in mice and, in principle, could be applied to human embryos. But scientists, ethicists and politicians are split over the merits of the two techniques.*

As yet, there is no consensus concerning the ethical issues related to these new technologies. It will take some time to consider the moral issues involved in both of these procedures. Clearly, any technology that produces a viable embryo that is merely incapable of successful implantation in the uterine wall is unacceptable.

So far as I am concerned, the most important dimension of this article is the way it begins and ends — with an acknowledgement that the issue of human dignity will not go away. As the reporters conclude: *And either way, the ethical debate over what constitutes life — or the potential for life — looks set to dog the field.*

In another important article, Professor [Robert P. George](#) of [Princeton University](#) argues that even more is at stake. In "[Fetal Attraction—What the Stem Cell Scientists Really Want](#)," Professor George explains: *Up to now, embryonic stem cell advocates have claimed that they are only interested in stem cells harvested from embryos at the blastocyst (or five-to six-day) stage. They have denied any intention of implanting embryos either in the uterus of a volunteer or in an artificial womb in order to harvest cells, tissues, or organs at more advanced stages of embryonic development or in the fetal stage. Advocates are well aware that most Americans, including those who are prepared to countenance the destruction of very early embryos, are not ready to approve the macabre practice of "fetus farming." However, based on the literature I have read and the evasive answers given by spokesmen for the biotechnology industry at meetings of the President's Council on Bioethics, I fear that the long-term goal is indeed to create an industry in harvesting late embryonic and fetal body parts for use in regenerative medicine and organ transplantation.*

Why? This would explain why some advocates of embryonic stem cell research are not cheering the news about alternative sources of pluripotent stem cells. If their real goal is fetus farming, then the cells produced by alternative methods will not serve their purposes.

Why would biomedical scientists be interested in fetus farming? Researchers know that stem cells derived from blastocyst-stage embryos are currently of no therapeutic value and may never actually be used in the treatment of diseases. (In a candid admission, South Korean cloning expert Curie Ahn recently said that developing therapies may take "three to five decades.")

In fact, there is not a single embryonic stem cell therapy even in clinical trials. (By contrast, adult and umbilical cord stem cells are already being used in the treatment of 65 diseases.) All informed commentators know that embryonic stem cells cannot be used in therapies because of their tendency to generate dangerous tumors. However, recent studies show that the problem of tumor formation does not exist in cells taken from cows, mice, and other mammals when embryos

have been implanted and extracted after several weeks or months of development (i.e. have been gestated to the late embryonic or fetal stage). This means that the real therapeutic potential lies precisely in the practice of fetus farming. Because the developmental process stabilizes cells (which is why we are not all masses of tumors), it is likely true that stem cells, tissues, and organs harvested from human beings at, say, 16 or 18 weeks or later could be used in the treatment of diseases. The article was published in the October 3, 2005 issue of *The Weekly Standard*.

This is a truly ominous warning — and Professor George is not a boy to ‘cry wolf’ when there is no wolf. He is a member of the President’s Council on Bioethics and serves as McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton.

An interesting article that sets out the basic issues in this debate is found at *Harvard Magazine*, where the article features an exchange of views between Professor George and Professor Michael Sandel of Harvard University. See “Debating the Moral Status of the Embryo,” and pay close attention to Professor George’s argument for the “equal moral status” view of the human embryo. As he explains, “*The principle to which I subscribe is one that says that all human beings are equal, and ought not to be harmed or considered to be less than human on the basis of age or size or stage of development or condition of dependency.*”

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