



Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities

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Dear Senator:

In accordance with a unanimous consent agreement approved on June 29, the Senate may soon vote on three bills relating to bioethics and stem cell research: H.R. 810, S. 2754 and S. 3504. On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops I am writing to comment on each proposal.

H.R. 810, “Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act”

This bill violates a decades-long policy against forcing taxpayers to support the destruction of early human life. Federal funds would promote research using “new” embryonic stem cell lines, encouraging researchers to destroy countless human embryos to provide more cell lines and qualify for federal grants. However, no alleged future “promise” can justify promoting the destruction of innocent human life here and now, whatever its age or condition.

The argument that “excess” embryos may be discarded by clinics anyway is morally deficient. Such arguments have been rejected by our government in all other contexts, as when harmful experiments have been proposed on death-row prisoners or on unborn children intended for abortion. The fact that others may do harm to these nascent lives gives Congress no right to join in the killing, much less to make everyone else complicit in it through their tax dollars.

While these moral considerations are paramount, it is also worth noting that the factual assumptions behind the embryonic stem cell campaign are questionable. Embryonic stem cell research is not showing the remarkable “promise” claimed by supporters, but lags far behind adult stem cells and other approaches that are providing real treatments for dozens of conditions. Experts now predict that treatments may emerge in “decades” or not at all. Other experts admit that use of so-called “spare” embryos is only a transitional step in any case, that *creating* human embryos (by cloning or by *in vitro* fertilization) *solely* for destructive research will be the next essential step. We also know that only 3% of frozen embryos in fertility clinics are designated by their parents for use in research – ensuring that attempts to move toward large-scale research or treatments will require creating and destroying new human lives on a massive scale.

In the name of sound ethics and responsible science, Congress should reject H.R. 810.

S. 2754, “Alternative Pluripotent Stem Cell Therapies Enhancement Act”

Even supporters of destructive embryo research have said that “the derivation of stem cells from embryos remaining following infertility treatments is justifiable only if no less morally problematic alternatives are available for advancing the research” (National Bioethics Advisory Commission, *Ethical Issues in Human Stem Cell Research*, Sept. 1999, Vol. I, p. 53). Congress has a responsibility to explore how such research may be advanced *without* creating moral problems.

S. 2754 serves this important goal, by funding efforts to derive and study cells which have the capabilities of embryonic stem cells but are not obtained from a human embryo. For example, many studies suggest that stem cells from adult tissues and umbilical cord blood already have the versatility once thought to exist only in embryonic cells, or may acquire this versatility by various forms of “reprogramming.” Pluripotent stem cells may or may not have advantages over other stem cells for some forms of research – and such advantages, if any, are most likely not in the area of providing direct treatments for patients. But the effort to explore all feasible avenues of research that do *not* attack human life is worth pursuing.

This bill does not fund research using human embryos, and references a careful definition of “human embryo” in the Labor/HHS appropriations bill that has served the cause of ethical research very well since 1996. In the case of any technique whose nature is uncertain, the bill provides for additional basic and animal research, to make certain that the technique does not create or harm embryos before it can be applied to humans. In short, it defines a clear and responsible policy that should be supported by defenders of the sanctity of human life, as well as by those tempted to support stem cell research that destroys life.

S. 3504, “Fetus Farming Prohibition Act”

This bill amends current federal law against abuses in the area of fetal tissue research, to prevent the most egregious abuse of all: the use of human fetal tissue (such as fetal stem cells) obtained by growing human embryos in a human or animal uterus in order to provide such tissue.

Because no member of Congress has voiced support for such atrocities, the only argument against this bill may be that it is not needed because no one wants to do such a thing. I wish this were true. But in fact, most animal studies cited as “proof of principle” for so-called therapeutic cloning have required exactly this – placing cloned animal embryos in a womb and growing them to the fetal stage to obtain usable stem cells. Some researchers call this the new “paradigm” for human treatments from cloning. And while the biotechnology industry insists it has no interest in maintaining cloned human embryos past 14 days, it has supported state laws such as one enacted in New Jersey which allow such “fetus farming” into the ninth month of pregnancy to harvest body parts. (See “Research Cloning and ‘Fetus Farming’” at www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/bioethic/cloning/farmfact31805.htm.) Now is the time to enact a national policy against such grotesque abuse of women and children, by approving S. 3504.

In short, the Senate has an opportunity to approve two bills that respect both science and ethics – and to reject misguided legislation that ignores ethical demands in its pursuit of an ever more speculative and elusive “progress.” Technical progress that makes humans themselves into mere raw material for research is in fact a regress in our humanity. Therefore I strongly urge you to oppose H.R. 810, and to approve the other two bills proposed as part of this agreement.

Sincerely,



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U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops