

Stem Cell Obfuscation

by Bob Perry

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If you pay attention to the news at all, you are probably convinced that stem cell research will eventually solve every medical challenge our society faces. The blind will see. The paralyzed will walk. Cancer will be cured. All this will be possible if the anti-science zealots in the pro-life wing of conservative politics would just get out of the way. And so, on March 9, 2009, our long walk in the scientific wilderness ostensibly came to an end when President Obama issued his Executive Order (EO) removing barriers to responsible scientific research involving human stem cells. The president's announcement on lifting the ban said, in part:

With the Executive Order I am about to sign, we will bring the change that so many scientists and researchers; doctors and innovators; patients and loved ones have hoped for, and fought for, these past eight years: we will lift the ban on federal funding for promising embryonic stem cell research...in recent years, when it comes to stem cell

research, rather than furthering discovery, our government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values...Many thoughtful and decent people are conflicted about, or strongly oppose, this research. I understand their concerns, and we must respect their point of view. But after much discussion, debate and reflection, the proper course has become clear. The majority of Americans-from across the political spectrum, and of all backgrounds and beliefs-have come to a consensus that we should pursue this research. That the potential it offers is great, and with proper guidelines and strict oversight, the perils can be avoided.

No more false choices. No more political interference in our scientific research. The ban is lifted. Change has come! It should be noted that the ethical concerns some claimed to have had about the issue were assuaged by an appeal to the consensus of the majority of unidentified Americans from across the political spectrum. While it may or may not be true that a majority of Americans believe this research should be pursued, it is unclear when it was determined that ethical considerations should be affirmed by a show of hands. In any case, the president clearly implied that it was George W. Bush in particular who thwarted all advancement in scientific research because he placed his anti-scientific, Neanderthal faith ahead of the more reasonable desires of those who wanted to find cures. The new administration ended that long national nightmare with a wistful gaze at a teleprompter and the swipe of a pen. There is just one minor problem with this narrative. It is complete nonsense. The legal and political meanderings surrounding this issue have become so muddled it is instructive to distill them into recognizable form. Though most of us would be vaguely aware of at least some of these events, seeing how the stem cell issue has actually played out is stunning to behold. Consider the following timeline:

1978: In the wake of the controversial July 25th birth of the first “test tube baby,” Louise Brown, Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano appoints an Ethics Advisory Board (EAB), which concludes that “research on very early embryos within the first 15 days of development [is] acceptable to develop techniques for in vitro fertilization (IVF).”¹

- This EAB was appointed because of an earlier decision by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects to prohibit experimentation on IVF embryos unless approved by an EAB.

- The controversy surrounding this policy led President Carter to allow the EAB's tenure to expire. Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush chose not to reestablish it- effectively blocking embryo research.

1994: The Human Embryo Research Panel appointed by the head of the National Institute of Health's Harold Varmus, recommends allowing the development of IVF techniques and the study of embryonic stem cells.²

- Such research would only be allowed with "spare" IVF embryos obtained through informed parental consent.
- The panel recommended further consideration of the creation of embryos for research purposes and argued for federal funding of the same. The contentious nature of that stance led to further political maneuvers during the Clinton administration.

1996: Congress passes, and President Clinton signs, a rider to an appropriations bill, titled the Dickey-Wicker Amendment, which makes it illegal for the federal government to fund research that destroys human embryos. This rider has been reapproved by Congress and signed by the president in office *every year since then*.

1998: President Clinton signs an Executive Order enforcing the ban on federal funding for ESCR that destroys human embryos. He bases his decision to do so on the restrictions created by the Dickey-Wicker Amendment.

2000: After six years of taking a position against taxpayer funding of the destructive research, and on his way out of office, President Clinton flip-flops and announces his support for new federal guidelines that would allow taxpayer funding of embryo-destructive research. This apparent set-up for the incoming Gore administration backfires when Gore loses the election.

2001-August 9th: President Bush signs an EO meant to compromise on the restrictions that had previously been placed on ESCR. This order continues the restrictions put in place by the Dickey-Wicker Amendment but allows an exception for more than \$200 million in federal funding for twenty-one existing stem cell "lines" that had previously been created (through IVF). Thus, *President Bush becomes the first president to allow federal funding of ESCR.*³ At this point, federal funding for ESCR is restricted to these twenty-one lines. It is not "banned." There is not, *and there has never been*, a ban on *privately* funded research.

2007-June 20th: President Bush issues Executive Order #13435, which *requires the government to fund research* into alternative methods of obtaining pluripotent stem cells-methods such as Induced Pluripotent Stem Cells (IPSC)-that do *not* require the destruction of embryos but instead “induce” regular adult skin cells to act like pluripotent cells.⁴

2008: “Scientific researchers hail the development of IPSCs as the biggest scientific breakthrough of the year.”⁵

2009-March 9th: President Obama rescinds Bush’s August 9, 2001, EO with his own EO entitled, *Removing Barriers to Responsible Scientific Research Involving Human Stem Cells*. The revocation of Bush’s EO is heralded as “lifting the ban on federal funding for promising embryonic stem cell research (ESCR).” This EO simultaneously revokes Bush EO #13435, which has provided federal funding of successful IPSC research. This aspect of the order is not mentioned at the press conference.

2009-March 11th: President Obama signs and renews the Dickey-Wicker Amendment, which continues the ban on federal funding for ESCR that *Obama claims to have lifted two days earlier*. No announcement is made and no press conference is called.

Whatever one’s politics, it is hard to deny the purposeful deceit and tactical shenanigans that have gone on with respect to ESCR. Obama claims to want to honor both the scientific promises of stem cell research and the ethical reservations of those who hold them. But the practical outcomes of his policies have done nothing of the sort. Though he refuses to ever acknowledge a difference between stem cell research and *embryonic* stem cell research, his policies have led us to the point where creating cloned embryos with the purpose of letting the created human being live is illegal, while creating cloned embryos for the purpose of tearing them apart for research purposes is encouraged and federal funding for it has been increased. Though he claims to have “lifted the ban of the last eight years,” two days after he did so he knowingly and quietly resigned the amendment that *overrode his own Executive Order*. Though he claims to approve of “promising research,” President Obama touts the very kind of research-*embryonic* stem cell research-that has led to exactly zero cures. At the same time, his revocation of President Bush’s Executive Order #13435 directly eliminated federal funding for adult stem cell research such as IPSC that has already led to more than seventy-three successful therapies. Most disingenuously, and most importantly, Obama believes that his opponents on this issue are offering us “a false choice between sound science and moral values.” Further, in his speech at

Notre Dame University, he claimed to seek “common ground” with those who do have ethical reservations about ESCR. One must wonder why, if the conflict some seem to see between sound science and moral values is a false one, there would be any need for compromise at all. Even if we disregard the inconsistency in those two lines of thought, it is clear that research like that being done on IPSC gives us the best of both worlds. Beyond its proven technical success, it holds the principal advantage of avoiding the very aspect of ESCR that some find ethically troubling-the destruction of human embryos. This represents the ultimate political winner. By promoting IPSC, Obama could not only take credit for its scientific success, but also simultaneously allay the ethical concerns that many hold. It is a political dream solution, yet Obama deliberately and quietly defunded it. This can only mean that Obama’s motivations on stem cell research are not political. And if they are not political, one has to wonder just what his motivations are.

— Robert Perry

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NOTES

1. Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen, *Embryo* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 10-11.
2. Ronald M. Green, *The Human Embryo Research Debates: Bioethics in the Vortex of Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
3. Greg Koukl, “Responsible Science and ESCR,” *Solid Ground*, May/June 2009.
4. Wesley J. Smith, “Stem-Cell Doubletalk,” *The Weekly Standard*, March 12, 2009.
5. Wesley J. Smith, “Stem Cell Debate Is Over Ethics, Not Science,” *The Sacramento Bee*, March 19, 2009.