

FLORIDA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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SUPPORTING ETHICAL STEM CELL RESEARCH

Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Florida

"God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end; no one can under any circumstance claim the right directly to destroy an innocent human being."
(Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2258)

INTRODUCTION

1. We have witnessed amazing breakthroughs in medical technology in recent years, which have eased human suffering and even added to the lifespan of people. Adult stem cell research, including stem cells from umbilical cords and placentas, is one of the areas where great progress has been made. In order to ensure respect for the natural rights and dignity of all human beings, ethical guidelines in the area of stem cell research – as in every area of medical research – must be established and followed. This promotes both the individual and common good.

2. Our faith teaches the fact that God is the Creator of everything that is. For us, truth is one, and there can be no real contradiction between faith and science. As the Bishops of Florida, we seek to shed light on stem cell research in the current social and political climate. We encourage positive dialogue between science and faith, and are compelled to assist the laity in this effort. To this end, we offer a brief description of the science and summarize ethical issues involved in this type of research.

STEM CELL SCIENCE AND ETHICS^[I]

3. ***Describing Stem Cells***

A stem cell is a relatively unspecialized cell that can do one of two things when it divides: 1) make another cell like itself, or 2) make any number of cell types in the body with more specialized functions. This second activity is critical in the development of our bodies as we grow, and is central to the ability of our organs and tissues to regenerate and heal. For example, just one kind of stem cell in our blood can make new red blood cells, white blood cells, or other kinds, depending on what the body needs. These are like the stem of a plant that branches into new directions as it grows, hence the name "stem" cells.

4. ***Adult Stem Cell Research: Productive and Ethical***

Most stem cell research involves cells obtained from adult tissue, umbilical cord blood, and other sources that pose no ethical dilemma since they do not entail the killing of human beings. Amazingly, "adult" stem cells have been found in nearly every organ of our bodies, including bone marrow, skin, fat, brain, hair follicles and even the pulp of baby teeth. Thousands of lives have been saved through adult stem cells, most often in the form of "bone marrow transplants" for leukemia and other conditions. Furthermore, adult stem cells are currently being used in experimental therapies for a variety of human ailments, including Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injury, sickle cell anemia, heart damage, corneal damage and dozens of other conditions.

5. *Embryonic Stem Cell Experimentation: First and Foremost Immoral; and Unproductive*

In stark contrast, embryonic stem cells are harvested by a procedure that destroys live human embryos. Experiments have shown that, even though they are able to make virtually any kind of cell, embryonic stem cells are extremely unstable, readily cause uncontrolled tumors, and have yet to lead to any beneficial application in any human patients. While recognizing the great good that biomedical research seeks to bring to our physical condition, the Church nevertheless must oppose experimentation that entails the direct destruction of innocent human life – developing human beings in this case – even when a laudable goal of alleviating suffering of others is invoked. We are not choosing the lives of embryos over suffering patients; we are called to respect them both. In other words, we must help those who are suffering – and the Church witnesses well to this in many ways – but we may not use a good end to justify an evil means.

6. *Ethically Responsible Science Needed*

Some in our society contend that science ought to continue without ethical oversight. However, the choice is not between science and ethics, but between science that is ethically responsible and science that is not. History is rife with examples of failures to properly channel research and the terrible, broad social repercussions that follow.

ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN PUBLIC DEBATE

7. *Sharing Wisdom of Centuries, Guided by the Holy Spirit, in Pluralistic Process*

Reading the signs of our times in the light of the Gospel, the Church speaks with centuries of reflection on our common social life, guided by the Holy Spirit. Our positions on issues such as the sanctity of embryonic human life are consonant with the natural law tradition on human rights that transcends religious and ideological bounds. We are blessed to live in a pluralistic and democratic society where we can participate in our government and indeed even bear a responsibility to promote the common good of all people in our state.

8. *No Endorsements for Candidates; We Take Positions on Issues and Advance Them*

While we do not endorse individual candidates for office for a range of reasons, we do develop positions on issues, including some constitutional ballot initiatives that are before voters in our state, and advocate actively and directly.

SITUATION IN FLORIDA

9. *No State Funds for Destructive Embryo Research, But No Prohibitions Exist*

We are pleased that no state funds have been used to fund experimentation that destroys human embryos to date, but we lament that the state legislature has been unable to craft a workable framework that prohibits this activity or state funding for it into the future. Neither has our state legislature prohibited processes that yield cloned human embryos, a grave and moral concern for our State.

10. *Supporting Efforts to Prevent Destructive Embryo Research and Funding*

In addition to legislative efforts to prohibit embryonic stem cell research and its funding, we extend our support to **Citizens for Science and Ethics, Inc.**^[ii], which seeks to place an amendment to our state constitution before voters in the November 2006 election that would ensure that “***no revenue of the state shall be spent on experimentation that involves destruction of a live***

human embryo." To this end, we have encouraged the gathering of constitutional ballot petitions in Catholic parishes.

11. Without such an amendment, the people of Florida will be at risk for cooperation in destructive embryo research by supporting it with our tax revenues. In addition, Floridians may fund experiments that are not only unethical, but less promising than other avenues of research.

CONCLUSION

12. Our living ethical tradition does provide guidance to this urgent issue of stem cell research. In the effort to establish ethical guidelines in our state for stem cell research and its funding, we invoke the intercession of St. John the Baptist, whom God called to prepare a holy people for Christ the Lord, and Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Unborn. May God grant us joy in spirit, and guide all who believe into the way of salvation and peace. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

[i]

Cf., "Stem Cell Research and Human Cloning: Questions and Answers", United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC, 2004, publication 5-665. See www.usccb.org.

[ii]

Citizens for Science and Ethics, Inc. is a Florida non-profit corporation seeking to promote an ethical research environment in the state. For more information, see www.scienceandethics.org.

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