

## CONTINUED...

## Research

Continued from page 1

ly need them," the scientists wrote.

At the same time, however, 70 members of the U.S. Congress also published two letters in March stating their opposition to the scientists' reasoning. The congressional representatives were led by New Jersey Republican Christopher Smith, who said: "Americans will not endorse lethal experiments on infants just because (scientists) claim it would be useful."

This fear of embryonic research's consequences is shared by Richard M. Doerflinger, associate director for policy development at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. In a number of public statements, Doerflinger has been highly critical of the direction embryonic stem cell research is taking.

"(E)thical norms on human experimentation have demanded that we never inflict death or disabling injury on any unconsenting individual of the human species simply for the sake of benefit to others," Doerflinger told the National Bioethics Advisory Commission.

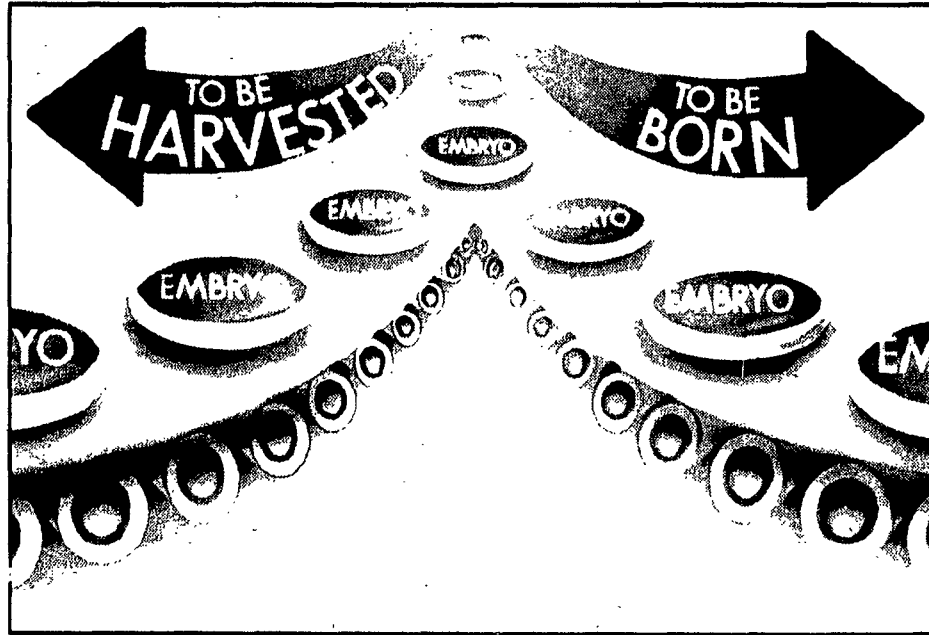
Doerflinger made this point during testimony before the commission, which in May called for federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. Currently, the federally funded National Institutes of Health are working on creating guidelines for such research. The guidelines are expected to be released this month.

Although the Clinton administration has said it will uphold the federal ban on creating embryos for research purposes, it has endorsed using embryos obtained from such private sector sources as fertilization clinics.

But if Catholic ethical experts had their way, the soon-to-be-released federal guidelines would prohibit the use of virtually all embryonic stem cells. However, they are somewhat pessimistic about their views becoming the nation's view, given the tone set by the federal government and many in the scientific community.

"The argument that the destruction of embryonic human beings is permissible when it provides sufficient promise of medical and scientific progress may win the day," read an article in the August edition of *Ethics & Medics* published by the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Boston. "If it does, our nation will have taken yet another step down the long and perilous path that subordinates human morality to technology."

However, in a phone interview from his Washington, D.C., office, Doerflinger was somewhat more optimistic. He noted that the last time the federal government considered funding embryo research in



1994, fierce public opposition stopped it. He added that once the new guidelines are released, the public is given 60 days to comment on them before Congress can consider funding proposals.

"We're hoping that Catholics, pro-life groups and other concerned citizens will be filing comments and saying that this is something they don't want their tax dollars going to," he said.

## Hope or horror?

Stem cell research presents some of the most exciting and the most ethically challenging promises in the history of science, according to Father Kevin T. FitzGerald, SJ, who holds a doctorate in molecular genetics and is based in Chicago.

In layman's terms, stem cells are the body's building blocks, able to divide without limit and to give rise to specialized cells. Stem cells are present in people throughout the course of their lives, Father FitzGerald said, and stem cells taken from both adults and the unborn have been studied.

Indeed, several recent articles in both mainstream as well as medical and scientific periodicals have pointed to the wonders of stem cell research. For example, an April 2 article in *The New York Times* noted recent research showed stem cells taken from adult bone marrow "can in principle be used to repair bone, cartilage, tendon and many other injured or aged tissues."

The church has no problem with using voluntarily provided adult stem cells, nor with cells taken — with parental permission — from embryos that were spontaneously aborted or miscarried, Father FitzGerald said in a phone interview. Even cells taken from an umbilical cord's blood could be used for research and therapeutic purposes.

That point was echoed by Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, a Catholic and a professor of medicine and medical ethics at George-

town University who has advised the U.S. bishops on the stem cell debate.

"I think stem cell research by itself is not immoral," he said. "The main question centers on where you get your stem cells."

The church draws a line at using cells from deliberately aborted embryos or fetuses, even though some supporters of stem cell research have argued that is not immoral because the unborn were not created for the purpose of research.

"If (cells) come from selectively aborted fetuses, it is not morally acceptable to use these tissues," Pellegrino said, adding that the same view holds true for embryos. "You are actively cooperating with an evil that is wrong ... Just because an embryo is five days old does not mean it is expendable. It's a member of the human race, the human family."

At the same time, live embryos obtained from fertilization clinics also cannot be used morally either, even though individuals who created them consider them "spare" or "surplus" embryos never to be born, Father FitzGerald noted.

"From our tradition, there is no such thing as a spare human life," Father FitzGerald said.

In the case of live embryos, he compared using their tissue to taking organs out of death-row prisoners or terminally ill cancer patients — a process that, from a strictly scientific point of view, would be more efficient than waiting for the person to die, as is the ethically sound practice now.

"We don't take out their organs because they're going to die anyway," he said.

Rochester Dr. Joseph Di Poala, a board member of St. Luke's Medical Association, an independent group of Catholic physicians from the Diocese of Rochester, said stem cell research was a topic of discussion at a recent conference he attended on Catholic medical ethics in Boston.

Like Father FitzGerald and Pellegrino, Di Poala said Catholic opposition to embryonic stem cell research is rooted in the church's reverence for all life.

"The problem with stem cell research is they'd be destroying a lot of these embryos," he said. "We're trying to respect the dignity of life from the start."

## Ironic alternative

Pellegrino stressed that he is sympathetic to patients who might benefit from the results of embryonic stem cell research.

"I can understand the plight of the person who has Parkinson's or Alzheimer's ...," he said. "(But) I would say to that person, 'You cannot, for your benefit, use tissues that are abortions.'"

Doerflinger noted that it was dangerous to even place the plight of a patient over that of the embryo. If today's scientists are allowed to kill embryos, tomorrow's scientists may be allowed to kill Alzheimer's or Parkinson's patients for the "benefit" of humanity, he argued. To buttress his point, he noted that some medical and scientific ethicists no longer even worry about whether an embryo is human. Such ethicists simply argue that it is justifiable to kill human embryos for the resulting scientific benefit.

Ironically, given the fierce debate between those who consider embryos humans and those who don't, embryonic stem cell research may take second stage to adult stem cell research, Father FitzGerald said. The priest said he foresees the day when patients can use their own stem cells to repair their bodies. That practice would eliminate one problem with using embryonic stem cells — that fact that a patient's body may reject them. Theoretically, he said, for example, a patient may someday be able to use stem cells from his or her blood to repair other organs in the body.

Indeed, an article in the Jan. 30 edition of the *British Medical Journal* reported that findings on adult stem cells by researchers in Seattle and Italy had meant "the need for fetal cells as a source of stem cells for medical research may soon be eclipsed by the more readily available and less controversial adult stem cells."

In the end, however, Father FitzGerald stressed that, for Catholics, the debate over stem cell research doesn't come down to whether scientists should use adult stem cells or the cells of the unborn. It comes down to the question of whether or not you believe the embryo is a full human being, a belief the church upholds. The priest likened the current arguments over embryonic stem cell research to the way scientists argued over nuclear weapons research.

"In situations like this, not only does science not have the final say, it shouldn't have the final say," he said.

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