

WORLD & NATION

Celebrities, other activists clash on stem-cell act

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — For the second time in five months, Hollywood celebrities squared off with lesser-known Americans before a Senate subcommittee Sept. 14 over the issue of human embryonic stem-cell research.

Actor Michael J. Fox, who has Parkinson's disease, and actress Mary Tyler Moore, who has diabetes, asked the Senate Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education to quickly approve legislation that would allow government funding of stem-cell research involving aborted fetuses and discarded embryos.

Among those speaking against the proposed Stem Cell Research Act of 2000 were a paralyzed motivational speaker from California and two men with diabetes — a Lutheran pastor from Missouri and the chief scientific officer for a North Carolina company that is developing treatments for diabetes from adult stem cells.

Scientists say stem-cell research shows promise in the fight against such diseases as diabetes, Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, Parkinson's, Tay-Sachs, Lou Gehrig's disease and multiple sclerosis, as well as heart disease and spinal cord injuries. Stem cells are master cells that can give rise to other cells.

But scientists disagree over whether research involving adult stem cells — which can be taken directly from the patient without harm — shows sufficient promise to continue the ban on federal funding of research on stem cells from human embryos or fetuses.

The National Institutes of Health has is-



Reuters/CNS

Celebrities Michael J. Fox and Mary Tyler Moore join others in testifying before a U.S. Senate subcommittee Sept. 14. Fox and Moore urged further funding for stem-cell research utilizing aborted fetuses and discarded embryos.

sued guidelines lifting that ban, but placing restrictions on how the stem cells can be obtained. The Stem Cell Research Act of 2000, sponsored by Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., the subcommittee chairman, and Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, would go further, allowing women using in vitro fertilization to donate their "spare" embryos to federally funded researchers.

Dr. Anton-Lewis Usala, chairman and chief scientific officer of the North Carolina-based Entelle Inc., spoke Sept. 14 both as a scientist and as a person who has had diabetes for 41 of his 42 years. He said er-

roneous medical opinions in the early treatment of diabetes caused some children to die.

Ron Heagy, who was paralyzed from the neck down 20 years ago, also urged the subcommittee to reject funding stem-cell research if it means exploiting another human being.

"I'm not opposed to research," said the San Diego-based motivational speaker. "I'm not opposed to walking again. I'm just opposed to the process."

But most of the attention at the hearing went to Fox, who won the Emmy for best ac-

tor in a comedy series at the awards ceremony three days earlier, and Moore, who serves as international chairwoman of the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation.

Saying that research involving stem cells derived from embryos and fetuses showed greater promise than adult stem-cell research, Fox urged the subcommittee "not to let politics delay" approval of government funds for research.

Saying that it is "not the reality here" that any human being would be harmed by using aborted fetuses or discarded embryos, Fox added, "I would not claim any benefit that occurred at the harm of another."

"The government has done its work" in holding several hearings on the matter, he said. "We ask you now to relinquish our tax dollars and let the scientists do their work."

Moore was even more blunt, saying that the embryos in question, "according to science, bear as much resemblance to a human being as a goldfish."

"We're dealing with flesh-and-blood people now who feel and deal with real debilitation right now and our obligation is to those who are here," she added.

But Usala said the decision on whether to use stem cells from fetuses and embryos is more than just a medical one.

"It must be considered in the context of its potential to initiate an insidious disease in our society's values, and its potential to erode the foundation of the United States' protection of all individuals," he said.

At an earlier hearing in late April before the same subcommittee, actor Christopher Reeve spoke in favor of the legislation and Mary Jane Owen, executive director of the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities, testified against it. Both use wheelchairs because of spinal cord damage.

British bishops back decision of parents with Siamese twins

By Paulinus Barnes
Catholic News Service

MANCHESTER, England — The Catholic parents of Siamese twins, not a court of law, should determine whether they should be separated in an attempt to save at least one of their lives, said British church officials.

The parents were awaiting a ruling from Britain's Court of Appeal on the fate of their daughters, who were born Aug. 8 in Manchester. The parents hoped that the appeal court would overturn an Aug. 25 High Court ruling which gave doctors permission to operate and separate the twins in an operation that would let one twin live but almost certainly kill her sister.

The appellate court asked Sept. 5 for another medical opinion on the girls' condition.

In their submission to the initial court hearing, the girls' parents said they could not contemplate the death of one of their babies. The girls — named as Jodie and Mary to protect their real identities — are joined at the lower abdomen and have only one working heart and pair of lungs between them.

"We have very strong feelings that neither of our children should receive any medical treatment. We certainly do not want separation surgery to go ahead, as we know and have been told very clearly that it will result in the death of our daughter, Mary," they said.

In a radio interview Sept. 4, Archbishop Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster, said, "The parents have made it clear that they love both their children equally and cannot consent to one of them being killed to help the other. I believe this moral instinct is right."

The archbishop said that he supported the decision which the parents had made, against any medical treatment for the twins, in a "tragic and heart-rending" case.

It would only be right for the court to overrule the rights of parents, he said,

when there was clear evidence that the parents were not acting in their children's best interests and wished them harm.

"In this case the parents have simply adopted the position they felt was consistent with their conscience and with their love for both children," said the archbishop.

Bishop Terence Brain of Salford, whose diocese covers St. Mary's Hospital where the twins were born, said: "The parents are the ones responsible for these children, not the court. In the law we recognize that the primary responsibility for children lies with the parents."

The Guild of Catholic Doctors stated that the High Court's decision was flawed: "The parental bond, expressing truly altruistic love, is better at discerning the best interests of these babies, and we feel that in

these circumstances it was wrong for the medical team to seek court approval to override the parents' wishes," it said.

The family, who have not been identified, came to England for specialist medical help with the birth of the twins.

Specialists at the hospital have said that Jodie would stand a good chance of a normal life if they operated to separate her from her twin. The operation would, however, mean certain death for Mary.

The doctors also believe that if they do not operate, both twins will die, probably within six months.

In an interview with Catholic News Service Sept. 5, medical ethicist Dr. Helen Watt supported the parents' decision.

Watt, a research fellow at the Linacre Centre, a Catholic study center on medical

ethics, said: "The parents are entitled to protect Mary against this lethal mutilation.

"I would work from the principle that a doctor must not invade a patient's body if this is going to do only lethal harm. If the intervention is doing only harm, then I would say this is morally unacceptable.

"The doctors have two patients here whose lives and bodies must be respected," she said.

Retired Cardinal Ersilio Tonini of Ravenna-Cervia, in northeast Italy, offered the parents an "ethical alternative" to going through with the operation, according to Pro-Life Alliance in a statement issued at the end of August.

The offer included "indefinite and completely free medical services" as well as an apartment in an Italian hospital, it said.

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