

WORLD & NATION

Bishops' official faults stem cell poll defects

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — An official of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities has criticized an ABC News/Beliefnet survey that reported Americans support stem-cell research and government funding of it by a 2-1 margin.

"While ABC reported afterward that its poll was about embryonic stem-cell research, the poll itself simply asked people whether they support 'stem-cell research,'" said Richard M. Doerflinger, the secretariat's associate director for policy development.

The first survey question read: "Sometimes fertility clinics produce extra fertilized eggs, also called embryos, that are not implanted in a woman's womb. These extra embryos either are discarded, or couples can donate them for use in medical research, called stem-cell research."

"Some people support stem-cell research, saying it's an important way to find treatments for many diseases. Other people oppose stem-cell research, saying it's wrong to use any human embryos for research purposes. What about you — do you support or oppose stem-cell research?"

Doerflinger said the poll misrepresented the options available to fertility clinic clients by saying the embryos are either discarded or donated for medical research.

"In fact the parents generally have two other options: preserve the embryos for possible future use — chosen by about 90 percent — or donate them to another couple so they can have a child," he said.

"The poll creates a false impression that

for these embryos, the only alternative to being dissected for research is to be thrown away," he added.

Doerflinger also said the alternatives presented as the basic viewpoints at issue were "confusing to say the least."

"Why would opposition to the use of embryos in research make someone oppose all stem-cell research?" he asked.

He noted that embryos are not the sole source of stem cells.

"A balanced poll would have pointed out what makes embryonic stem-cell research so controversial," he said. "It also would have mentioned the alternative of increased funding for stem-cell research based on other sources — research which is extremely promising and does not pose this terrible moral problem."

The second ABC News/Beliefnet question asked whether federal funding for medical research "should or should not include funding for stem-cell research."

Doerflinger said that "the real question" facing Congress and the Bush administration "is whether to fund that part of stem-cell research which requires destroying live human embryos."

"ABC did not ask that question," he said. Congress is currently considering opposing bills on federal funding of stem-cell research, one that would include use of embryonic cells and one that would limit such research to the use of stem cells not taken from embryos.

In early June a poll conducted by International Communications Research included questions commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on federal funding for stem-cell research.



Joanna Lightner/Catholic Standard and Times

Freedom rings

Five-year-old Lauren Strickland from St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Clearwater, Fla., touches the Liberty Bell on Independence Mall in Philadelphia June 22. On July 4th Americans celebrated the 225th anniversary of the birth of the nation.

The poll found that 70 percent of people opposed use of their federal tax dollars to fund "experiments using stem cells from human embryos" when the questioner informed them that "the live embryos would be destroyed in their first week of development to obtain these cells."

A second NCCB-commissioned question read: "Stem cells for research can be obtained by destroying human embryos. They can also be obtained from adults, from placentas left over from live births and in other ways that do no harm to the donor. Scientists disagree on which source may end up being the most successful in treating diseases. How would you prefer your tax dollars to be used this year for stem-cell research?"

Almost 67 percent favored using other stem cells but not embryos; 18 percent said all methods including embryo cells should be allowed; the remainder didn't know, declined to answer or rejected any funding for stem-cell research.

The ABC News Web site report on its own poll referred to the first question in the earlier NCCB poll as an example of "interest-group polling" in which the language used was a significant factor in the results.

It said the NCCB "posed the issue by saying 'live embryos would be destroyed' for undefined 'experiments'; it found 70 percent opposed. By contrast, a pro-research poll didn't mention embryos, referring to 'excess fertilized eggs' and listing seven 'deadly diseases' the research could help treat. It found 77 percent in favor."

The ABC report did not mention the second question posed by the NCCB, specifically focusing on funding alternatives for different sources of stem cells.

Since more than 1,000 people were surveyed in the NCCB and ABC News/Beliefnet polls, the margin of error in both polls was plus or minus 3 percent.

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