

Official wants to stem embryo uses

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Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — The Catholic Church supports scientific advances, but harvesting embryonic stem cells goes too far because it directly attacks human beings, according to Jann Armantrout, life-issues coordinator for the Rochester Diocese's Catholic Charities.

Armantrout made her point Nov. 18 at the University of Rochester Medical Center during a debate on embryonic stem-cell research before more than 200 graduate medical students and others. Dr. Mark Noble, professor of biomedical genetics and a researcher in the embryonic stem-cell field, argued for the opposing side.

Materials provided by Armantrout describe stem cells as master cells formed shortly after fertilization. These cells can develop into all of the cell types in the body, such as brain, blood, muscle and skin. Some stem cells also are present in the bodies of adults.

Some scientists want to collect stem cells from aborted embryos and surplus embryos created for in vitro fertilization, a procedure the church also opposes. Because thousands of human embryos created for in vitro fertilization have never been implanted, some argue they could be used for stem-cell experiments, a process currently banned by the federal government and opposed by the church.

Armantrout stressed that the Catholic Church believes that a person is a person from the moment of conception. We all begin as a single cell, she noted, a cell that contains the genetic blueprint that determines who we are.

"It is the same living, unique human organism throughout the process," she said.

Acknowledging that some scientists disagree with that perception, she went on to question their reasoning.

"The question is raised whether the amplified voices of science have the right to determine what is human," Armantrout said. Scientists need to listen to people from other intellectual fields who are concerned about human life as well, she said.

Armantrout noted that the church is not opposed to the advance of science, and pointed out that the church pioneered the establishment of hospitals and pharmacies in Europe.

"I am not attempting to silence Galileo, nor am I spending my time gathering sticks to burn scientists



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Jann Armantrout (right), life-issues coordinator for the Diocese of Rochester, debates the moral ramifications of embryonic stem-cell research with Dr. Mark Noble Nov. 18 at the University of Rochester.

at the stake," she said, drawing laughter from the audience.

She said that the church's concern for embryos is rooted in its belief that "every person is a treasure."

"Innocent human life is inviolable," she said. "It is always to be protected."

Armantrout also stressed that the church supports the use of core-blood and adult stem cells for treatment purposes. Such cells — which can be harvested from umbilical-cord blood after a baby's delivery or from the bodies of adults — hold great promise for treating such diseases as Parkinson's, she noted.

She also questioned whether it is just to spend money on embryonic stem-cell research when so many people lack access to primary health care. She said she also is concerned that embryonic stem-cell research may create a climate that commodifies human life.

For his part, Noble said he hoped the church would eventually drop its opposition to the use of embryonic stem cells for treating diseases. He noted that he welcomes dialogue with the church, and added that the Catholic Church is open to dialogue with science. He pointed out, for example, that the church has accepted the possibility of human evolution, adding that he hoped the church would change its mind about when human life begins.

"For me, the acorn is not the oak tree," he said.

Noble said that he believes there is a profound difference between a child and a 5-day-old embryo, or blastocyst, which has no discernible human features.

"No matter what we think we be-

lieve, we know in our hearts that a blastocyst is not a living human being," he said, later adding, "For me the magic is not in the blastocyst; for me the magic is in the formation of the brain."

Unused embryos created for in

vitro fertilization are "simple tiny balls of cells rotting in clinics," he said, and they could be used to help children with various diseases. He showed several slides of children, including a girl named Molly, who have various inherited diseases that might be helped through embryonic stem-cell research.

"Whose side are you on?" he asked rhetorically. "A ball of simple cells that is going to be flushed down a sink, or Molly and the many children like her?"

Noble said he hoped the church would eventually change its definition of the beginning of human life to the time of implantation of the fertilized egg in the womb, about six to 12 days after conception.

"It wouldn't be the first time that the Vatican had the foresight to go along with the scientists," Noble said.

In a session following the debate, Armantrout questioned Noble's arguments about the humanity of the blastocyst. Humans should not be defined by their functions, she said.

"I don't think we can determine the validity of human life based on human needs," she said.

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