

Stem Cell Research

Separating eternal human drive from contemporary cultural fashion

by *Bruce Lahn*

By now, the controversy surrounding human embryonic stem cell research is familiar to most of us. At its center are two opposing viewpoints. One argues that such research may bring tremendous benefits to human health: potential cures for debilitating conditions such as diabetes, Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injury. The other asserts that such research violates the sanctity of human embryos and is therefore morally and ethically unacceptable.

In my view, the eventual outcome of this debate will be decided by a simple fact of human nature. My prediction is that in the long run — maybe a few years, maybe a few decades — most people will have forgotten the controversy, while a small band of scientists will continue their stem cell studies without much public attention.

Why this prediction? Because I believe the viewpoint supporting stem cell research is predicated on a universal and eternal human drive, whereas the opposing side is based on a contemporary cultural conviction that is neither universal nor eternal.

Bruce Lahn, PhD, is an HHMI assistant investigator and an assistant professor in the departments of Human Genetics, and Molecular Genetics and Cell Biology.



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The universal and eternal human drive is to have a better life. This drive is not unique to humans. A product of evolution, it is encoded in the genes of all living things. Organisms with more of the drive are better equipped to survive and pass on their genes than those with less of it. In our species, this fundamental drive motivates us to work, to find friends and lovers, to have children and to dream about grander and better things for ourselves and those we care about. Call this selfishness if you will. While it may seem distasteful to some, being selfish is a crucial quality that has ensured the survival of our species to this point.

Stem cell research is simply one more step to help fulfill the human drive for a better life. I don't want to sound unreasonably rosy about the benefits of stem cell research. Indeed, I find some of the unqualified promises of stem cell research a bit exaggerated. Nevertheless, stem cell research does have real potential to improve several important aspects of our lives, something that even opponents of the research acknowledge. To many people, this potential is sufficient justification to pursue this research.

To others, though, the potential benefits are outweighed by moral conviction. In my opinion, this conviction — that it is morally wrong to use unwanted human embryos for research — represents a contemporary cultural fashion. I chose the word “fashion” not to trivialize anyone's belief, but because it conveys the idea that the belief is limited to a particular time, place and people, and is therefore neither universal nor eternal.

Opposition to stem cell research is restricted largely to Christians; it is not shared by most of the world's population. Indeed, prominent scholars of Judaism, a close cousin of Christianity, have argued that the use of unwanted human embryos to benefit people who are already living is not merely permissible, but an obligation. Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Moshe Dovid Tendler and Laurie Zoloth gave such testimony in June 2000 to the National Bioethics Advisory Committee. By this argument, it is the failure to conduct research on human embryonic stem cells that is in violation of religious teaching.

In many Asian countries, were you to ask someone if unwanted embryos should be used for research, they would probably wonder why you asked the question in the first place. In many of these cultures, the notion that early human embryos have a social and legal status independent of their parents simply does not exist in a typical person's mind. Indeed, with so many pressing issues confronting humanity today — war, hunger, disease, overpopulation, depletion of natural resources — the fact that there is a commotion over stem cell research in some “rich” countries seems curiously disproportionate.

But even if one were to strictly follow Christian dogma, one would encounter conflicting messages from different periods of history. Over time, value systems change, moral emphases shift and what is today's hot topic may be forgotten altogether tomorrow. Many concepts traditionally denounced by Christianity — or, for that matter, other value systems — now have become commonly accepted, or at least acquiesced

to, even by followers of the religion. These range from scientific principles such as heliocentricity and evolution, to human behavior such as birth control and homosexuality.

There is nothing wrong with cultural fashions. They provide a foundation upon which to model and judge our conduct, and they provide diversity and variety to our culture. But when fashions are in conflict with the most fundamental human pursuit — the drive to have a better life — they almost always give way. Nancy Reagan's staunch support for stem cell research is almost certainly due to her husband's Alzheimer's disease, even though it appears to contradict her conservative ideology. For people close to the cruelty of debilitating conditions, the instinctive and powerful drive for a better life suddenly overrides more tangential and philosophical considerations. This behavior is only human, and Nancy Reagan is no exception.

Debates such as the one over stem cells have taken place many times in recent history, and each time the outcome is similar: The universal drive for a good life eventually triumphs over less universal beliefs associated with particular value systems. When the first “test-tube baby” was born in 1978 by in vitro fertilization, some decried it as an ungodly intervention with nature. Indeed, it *is* intervention with nature, but the very ability to do so is why we are so successful as a species, and

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whether it is ungodly or not became irrelevant after people got used to it — and to its benefits. Today, assisted reproduction, which includes procedures much more exotic than in vitro fertilization, has become a multi-billion dollar industry. While criticisms and concerns of these practices linger, they have shifted: Now, rather than religious and ethical arguments, the issues most often raised concern safety.

A Chinese proverb reminds us that “the waxing and waning of all things are dictated by the laws of nature.” Similarly, our moral likes and dislikes, as intense as they may appear at the moment, will dissipate and give way to the more fundamental principles that govern our behavior. The stem cell controversy is no exception. With time, emotional arguments based on contemporary cultural fashions will fade, and people will go on with the usual business of making their lives better.