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Research That Could Save Lives

It has been said that to suppress the truth is to publish a lie. Nowhere is this more meaningful than in research, and nowhere is it more practiced than in the current ban on federal funds for fetal tissue transplantation research.

The suppression of truth in this case is twofold: It is done both to researchers and to sick and disabled people. Under the federal funding ban, researchers are turned away from promising opportunities for cures—not just treatments, but actual cures—of such diseases as diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. The path of science is changed by equivocation.

In turn, patients and their families are told that everything possible is being done but that their conditions are "incurable." Their hope is taken away by deliberate omission.

The reason for this policy of suppression is clear. The Bush administration is responding to the most extreme elements of the antiabortion movement, without ever stopping to consider whether their demands are humane, rational or even moral. Rather than allow transplants to save a life, as happens with organs from cadavers, the administration and its antiabortion allies insist that this tissue be discarded, no matter what good it might do. Don't study it, don't learn from it and above all don't transplant it.

This is bad medicine, and it is dangerous science policy.

It is important to be clear about what is at stake here. This research usually involves cells from a fetus that has been aborted. These cells are transplanted into an adult, a child, or—most recently—a fetus in utero. If the attempt is successful, the transplanted cells take on the function of the organ into which they are placed and actually cure the disease or disability of the recipient.

This research does not draw tissue from living fetuses or from potentially viable fetuses or from newborns. This research is on tissue from fetuses that are dead, with no viability and with no "potential life."

Two federal panels appointed by the Reagan administration have examined the science and the ethics of the conduct of fetal tissue transplantation. Both reported that this research is promising. Both recommended guidelines to prevent abuses, such as the sale of tissue or the encouragement of abortions. And both concluded that the research should be federally funded.

But the Bush administration has decided that federal funding of such transplantation research should be banned. It has done this not because of any reservation about its scientific merit, but because it fears that American women will have abortions in order to donate fetal tissue to research. The administration has reached this opinion with no empirical evidence, no expert opinion and against all comparisons with other countries in which such research is supported. This response is like trying to limit car crashes by banning organ transplants, and it is equally ludicrous.

There is tragic irony here. The coalition that calls itself "pro-life" is now in the position of advocating against life-saving research. The same groups that have sued to prevent parents from ending futile therapy for children with birth defects are now lobbying against cures that parents want for their children.

The irony has been compounded by the recent announcements of attempts to use this research to correct genetic diseases before the baby is born, so called fetus-to-fetus transplants of fetal tissue into the womb. Witnesses before the Health subcommittee recently described their attempts to save their child in this way. They have already lost two children to painful and extended illness. Conventional medicine has nothing to offer their third afflicted child. So they sought fetal tissue transplantation. It is not yet known if this technique cured the child, but it is the best hope.

These parents are strongly opposed to abortion, but they recognize that abortion exists in this country and that fetal tissue is available to save lives. As the father testified before Congress, stopping tissue from being used isn't going to bring the aborted fetus back. Indeed, he argues, many other parents of genetically diseased children now choose abortion as their only alternative; fetal tissue transplantation could give them hope for healthy children. The researcher confirms this by pointing out that of 19 couples he contacted with genetically diseased pregnancies, 18 elected abortion rather than research. It's hard to see how continuing such hopelessness is "pro-life."

By prohibiting federal support of this research, the administration has implicitly told those Americans afflicted with such disabilities and diseases that the cure for their disease is too controversial to study, too political to pursue. The White House is suppressing the truth from the very people whose lives depend upon it.

Instead, we should do everything possible to find out the truth about these diseases and potential cures. As long as the ban is in place, the value of fetal tissue research will be closeted away with other politically incorrect truth. During this ban on research, the National Institutes of Health has been forced to become an agency of government-approved disinformation and the guardian of a lie.

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