Stem Cell Executive Order Gets Mixed Reaction

BY JOYCE FRIEDEN

President Barack Obama's executive order reversing the Bush administration's restrictions on government-funded stem cell research drew cheers from some medical groups and jeers from others.

Under the previous policy, government funding for embryonic stem cell research was limited to studies using only the few stem cell lines that were in existence in August 2001, when then-President George W. Bush announced the policy. President Obama's executive order, which he signed in March, lifts those restrictions and allows funded research to include embryonic stem cell lines created after that date. However, the order does not lift a current ban on using federal funds to create stem cell lines if the creation involves destruction of human embryos. Federal policy does not affect privately funded stem cell research.

President Obama noted at the signing ceremony that "many thoughtful and decent people are conflicted about, or strongly oppose, [embryonic stem cell] research. I understand their concerns, and we must respect their point of view."

But he added that "in recent years, when it comes to stem cell research, rather than furthering discovery, our government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values. In this case, I believe the two are not inconsistent.

"After much discussion, debate and reflection, the proper course has become clear," he said. "The majority of Americans—from across the political spectrum, and of all backgrounds and beliefs—have come to a consensus that we should pursue this research. … That is a conclusion with which I agree. That is why I am signing this executive order and why I hope Congress will act on a bipartisan basis to provide further support for this research."

The president said that the government "will develop strict guidelines, which we will rigorously enforce, because we cannot ever tolerate misuse or abuse. And we will ensure that our government never opens the door to the use of cloning for human reproduction. It is dangerous, profoundly wrong, and has no place in our society, or any society."

Lawrence Tabak, Ph.D., acting deputy director of the National Institutes of Health, expressed support for the decision. "Researchers will now be able to pursue new knowledge about human development, regenerative medicine, and the origins of many of our most devastating diseases," he said in a teleconference. "This research promises to revolutionize how we predict, treat, and prevent many diseases, and will contribute to the development of lifesaving therapies. NIH will do its part to implement new policy and develop guidelines as expeditiously as possible to make sure the best science is funded and the research is conducted in a responsible manner."

The American Medical Association also applauded the change. "Stem cell research holds great promise to treat diseases that science has so far been unable to cure, and this change in policy will allow researchers to accelerate their efforts by applying for federal research funds," Dr. Joseph Heyman, chair of the AMA's board of directors, said in a statement. "The AMA supports biomedical research on stem cells and has encouraged strong public support of federal funding for this research. [This] action by President Obama will help scientists realize the potential of stem cell research to benefit the many Americans living with diseases such as diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's."

But Dr. David Stevens, CEO of the Christian Medical Association, in Bristol, Tenn., cited problems with embryonic stem cell research. First, there is a moral issue: "Embryos are human beings," he said. "When you destroy an embryo, you destroy a distinct human being." Also, the prospects for embryonic stem cell research have been overblown, he continued. "Even people in this field say that if treatment is going to come out of this, it's probably 20 years away."

Instead of spending money on embryonic stem cell research, "we should put our money where we can get real cures real fast"—with adult stem cells, which already have shown promising preliminary results, Dr. Stevens said. ■