

## POLICY &amp; PRACTICE

**Embryonic Stem Cell Alternatives**

A group of scientists, physicians, and ethicists appointed by President Bush to consider bioethics issues has described four possible alternatives to human embryonic stem cell research. In its latest report, the President's Council on Bioethics outlined possible ways of obtaining pluripotent, genetically stable human stem cells that do not involve creating, destroying, or harming human embryos. But the council stressed that the ideas are in the early stages and that some may not be ethically acceptable for trials in humans or human material. The

four possible approaches include extraction of cells from embryos in which cell division has stopped; biopsy of living embryos; extraction of cells from artificially created nonembryonic but embryo-like cellular systems; and dedifferentiation of somatic cells back to pluripotency. "While different members of the council assess the merits of the four proposals differently, the council shares the view that the group of proposals here discussed—and others like them that they may stimulate—deserve the nation's careful and serious consideration," council chair Leon Kass, M.D., said

in a letter to President Bush. Sean Tipton, spokesman for the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, said that all types of stem cells ought to be supported but noted that there is not a lot of science to back up the options outlined by the council. The report is available on the Internet at [www.bioethics.gov/reports/white\\_paper/index.html](http://www.bioethics.gov/reports/white_paper/index.html).

**Studies on Gender Differences Stalled**

Research into gender differences is receiving limited funding at the National Institutes of Health, according to the Society for Women's Health Research (SWHR). Grants awarded to study gen-

der differences make up only a small percentage of the total number of NIH grants, and none of the NIH institutes had devoted more than 8% of its funded grants to research on gender differences from 2000 to 2003, according to a report from SWHR. "We looked at NIH research grants awarded between 2000 and 2003 and found that across all institutes, an average of just 3% of grants focused on sex differences," Sherry Marts, Ph.D., SWHR vice president for scientific affairs and the author of the study, said in a statement. SWHR officials said that they had hoped to see increasing levels of funding into gender differences, but they are encouraged that some NIH institutes have established mechanisms to foster this research.

**Abortions Decline**

The number of abortions performed in the United States fell from 2001 to 2002, according to an analysis from the Alan Guttmacher Institute. Abortions declined by 10,000, from 1.30 million in 2001 to 1.29 million in 2002. The abortion rate also eased from 21.1 procedures per 1,000 women aged 15-44 in 2001 to 20.9 in 2002. The decline has slowed since the early 1990s. The figures are based on the Guttmacher Institute's analysis of available government abortion incidence data. "It takes time for political decisions to be reflected in the statistical data, so it is too soon to tell what the impact of Bush administration policies will be on U.S. abortion rates," Sharon Camp, president and CEO of the Guttmacher Institute, said in a statement.

**Georgia's Abortion Waiting Period**

A new abortion law in Georgia requires a woman who is considering an abortion to receive certain information 24 hours before the procedure. The "Woman's Right to Know Act" was signed into law last month by Gov. Sonny Perdue, a Republican, who called the law a "common sense approach to a sensitive issue." The required information includes the medical risks; the probable gestational age of the fetus; medical risks of carrying the fetus to term; medical assistance for prenatal care, childbirth, and neonatal care; and a notice that the father is liable for child support. But Planned Parenthood of Georgia said the law imposes a 24-hour waiting period on all women and requires physicians to communicate "misleading information about a purported risk of breast cancer, among other alleged hazards."

**GAO Weighs in on Health Fraud**

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is not monitoring its spending on health care fraud investigations as carefully as it should, according to a report from the Government Accountability Office. The report, which was requested by the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), found some agents who previously were assigned to health care fraud investigations had been shifted to counterterrorism activities. The GAO said it had been told by the FBI that the bureau wasn't too concerned about not spending enough because most of the time such spending was "historically far in excess" of the budgeted amount.

—Mary Ellen Schneider



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