

Stem Cell Research: The Great Moral Divide

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For/Against?



Facts

- James Thomson(University of Wisconsin at Madison) became first person to isolate and culture this unique type of cell
- If successful, stem cell research could potentially lead to cures for Parkinson's disease, diabetes, spinal cord injuries, etc.
- The process of creating a stem cell line destroys a fertilized human egg, which if implanted into a woman's uterus, could grow into a person
- Since August 2001 federal funding has been limited

- “We will, slowly and by increments, have gone from stem cells to embryo farms to factories with fetuses hanging (metaphorically) on meat hooks waiting to be cut open and used by the already born” Charles Krauthammer, M.D.

Sides of the Debate

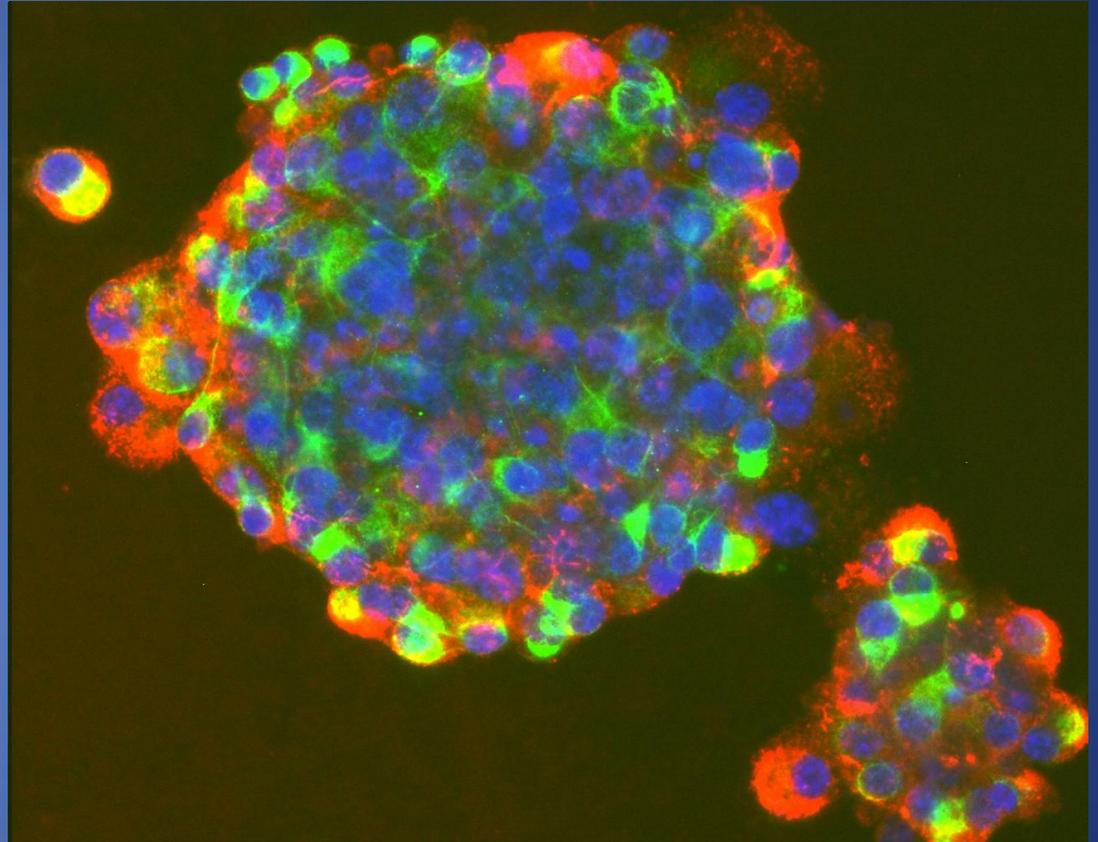
- Supporters of human embryonic stem cells for research and medicine sometimes describe the human embryo as nothing more than a ball of cells
- Opponents may mention the embryo as if it were a newborn baby
- Others portray the blastocyst as something in between: neither a clump of cells nor a person

Questions

Stem cell research touches us deeply because human lives are at stake

What are our moral obligations to the sick among us who could benefit from embryonic stem cell research?

Who should benefit from the first therapies, and how will they pay for them?



PHILOSOPHY MEETS THE NEW BIOLOGY

- These questions have given rise to a new field of study known as bioethics
- Bioethics studies the advances of medicine and technology and their impact on humankind

- Two distinct groups :
 - those who believe that embryos deserve protection and do not think they should use them for research
 - those who believe it is ok to use human embryos and embryonic cell research should proceed

Against

- Consider the embryo to be a human being
- In other words, we all start out as an embryo before we evolve over time
- Embryo deserves the same respect as a fully conscious human being
- Others who remain in the middle believe in the protection of embryos simply because of our uncertainties of what to consider an embryo.
- The Catholic Church denounces stem cell research because “God bestows personhood and a soul at the moment of conception.”

For

- Believe that embryos are not people and humankind may benefit from them
- Scientists, patients, and doctors tend to hold this view
- American Presbyterian Church holds the view that the respect of sick persons is above the respect for the embryo
- The potential benefits of medicine should be placed first because we are certain of human suffering, we are not certain that an embryo will become a person.

Sentience

- The capacity to feel psychic or physical pleasure or pain
- Some believe an embryo is a person at all stages, while others such as scientists believe they develop moral traits starting at six months.

The Pursuit of Perfection

- Conservative Christians and age-old philosophers such as Immanuel Kant: “do no harm”, destroying an embryo is equal to killing a person
- Leon Kass: slippery slope of science
 - in vitro fertilization — —>genetically engineered babies
- We begin as embryo and are worthy of dignity, therefore we are worthy of respect at every stage

The Pursuit of Perfection continued

- Role of desire - moving beyond our normal human conditions
- What role do you feel desire plays in our efforts to enhance our species
- Clash between our role and God's role
- Callahan: no need for Government supported research unless there is strong case that nation needs people to live longer.
- Do you think scarce resources would be more wisely spent on preventing illness and teaching others how to take care of their health?

Truth-Telling

- Stem-cell research is hyped, actual cures may be long time coming, if at all
- Dresser: we must be clear about research to public
- Why spend money on leading edge science? Why not put resources into fair distribution of treatments to patients who currently need it?
- Save private funds for stem-cell research and federal funding for patient benefit that doesn't contrast others moral views.
- Do you think you know the truth about stem cell research? Are you informed?

The Costs of Delay

- Charo: moral priority is to patients
- Other instances where patient advocacy forced change in regulations: AIDS and Cancer
- Regulations like 4- year moratorium on embryonic stem-cell research aimed to gain more information and set guidelines, however info can not be gained without the research it stops
- Knowledge is scarce without the research
- Some see biotechnology as out of control and others don't.

The Costs of Delay

- If you could use genetic engineering to make yourself or your offspring resistant to a deadly virus would you? Or why wouldn't you?
- Would you rather let a few people abuse science and medicine if thousands of sick people can be treated?
- Do you think federal resources should be put towards treating patients with current medicine or towards finding a possible cure or way to better our species with stem cell research?

Guidance and Oversight

- NAS report: *Guidelines for Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research*
- ESCRO committees: required by NAS of research centers to ensure ethical guidelines are followed and research has merit
- Donor protection: donors may be ok with donating but not with how the embryo's are used
- “expert review” -those who are in best position to determine if project is moral, scientific, and ethical are experts themselves
- Do we as a public know enough to contribute to a broader public guidance system for the research?

Can Mice Do Calculus

- NAS report contained a section on animal-human chimeras
- Ex. Mouse with brain made of human neurons. Is it part human?
- No proof to refute possibility that animals with human stem cells could have altered form of consciousness
- What do you think of using human stem cells for research in animals if it could benefit us?

Policy or Just Politics?

- Ethics are rules made by society to guide our attempts to live a good life
- What are major consequences of continuing stem cell research?
- What are major consequences for halting this research
- Moral divide: based on your own knowledge of stem cell research and your own moral/religious/ethical compass, how should stem cell research continue, if at all?