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Dear Member of Congress:

Today a letter was released urging President Bush to change current policy and use federal funds to encourage destruction of new human embryos for stem cell research.

Besides demonstrating a lack of respect for developing human life, that letter also relies on demonstrably false factual claims. The report that over 200 House members have signed the letter is a sad commentary on lawmakers' level of knowledge on this issue.

The letter builds on an announcement in the March 25 *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM) that Harvard scientists used private funds to kill 344 human embryos, producing 17 new embryonic stem cell (ESC) lines. ESC proponents now demand federal funding for research using these cell lines and others that may be created in the future.

According to the congressional letter, the cell lines now eligible for federal funding are insufficient for human clinical trials, and are "contaminated" by the mouse feeder cells in which they were cultured. The letter also claims that "more than 400,000 IVF embryos" now residing in freezers are available for creating new ESC lines.

Members of Congress who signed the letter need to be aware of some basic facts:

1. The new Harvard cell lines have the same qualities that supposedly make the currently eligible cell lines unsuitable for clinical use: They are inadequate in number and genetic diversity; they were grown on mouse feeder cells; and (as the NEJM article admits) they have already acquired genetic "abnormalities" which become much worse over time. Recent studies suggest that *all* human embryonic stem cell lines may develop genetic abnormalities similar to those found in cancer cells (see Draper et al. in the January 2004 issue of *Nature Biotechnology*). This is a problem with embryonic stem cells in general, preventing their use in humans for the foreseeable future.

2. The May 2003 issue of *Fertility and Sterility* did estimate that there may be 400,000 frozen embryos in the U.S. But that same article said that the vast majority of these embryos are slated for later reproductive use, and that the number available for research is about 11,000. If *all* these embryos were killed for their stem cells (which the authors call a "highly unlikely" scenario), this could produce "as many as" 275 cell lines. This number, too, would surely be inadequate for treating any major disease in the U.S.

3. Some of the stem cells now eligible for federal funding are frozen samples which have never been cultured – so they are not "contaminated" by feeder cells and have not yet developed

genetic abnormalities in culture. In the (unlikely) event that animal studies show such cells may have a unique potential for treating diseases, nothing in current policy prevents them from being cultured and used for federally funded research.

4. The letter says current funding limitations are forcing stem cell research overseas. The fact is, the United States remains the world's leader in biotechnology development; and the states and nations experiencing the most rapid development in this field are often those with laws *against* so-called "therapeutic" cloning and/or destructive embryo research (see the fact sheet "Human Cloning and Embryo Research: No Road to Biotechnology Growth," at www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/bioethic/embryo/growth11404.htm). American patients have found they have limited access to some new treatments, in part because the U.S. fixation on embryo research has let other countries take the lead in groundbreaking *adult* cell therapies for juvenile diabetes (Canada), spinal cord injury (Portugal and Israel), and cardiac repair (France, Germany and Brazil).

The stated purpose of the Bush policy on ESC research was to support basic research that would help identify the most promising avenues for curing devastating diseases. That purpose has been served. Non-embryonic cell therapies have quickly moved forward to perform many of the tasks once thought to be possible only with ESCs. Meanwhile, research on embryonic cells has shown them to be more uncontrollable, more prone to genetic abnormalities, more dangerous for human use than many predicted three years ago. These problems come not from any government policy, but from the nature of the cells themselves. Researchers who favor destructive embryo research should not scapegoat the federal government for their own failures and mistaken predictions.

I hope members of Congress who signed the letter to President Bush will study this issue further, and realize that they have been drawn into a political agenda that is not grounded in the facts. Accordingly I hope they will retract their signatures. This office would be happy to provide any needed assistance in this further study.

Sincerely,

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