

Title: Embryo stem cell research
Author: Focus on the Family Australia
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In recent times the issue of stem cell research has generated much controversy. Many people understand that stem cell research could potentially lead to successfully finding cures for those afflicted by disabilities and diseases. Naturally, this has a very large appeal, particularly to those who have been debilitated or who have family members and friends who struggle on a daily basis with the associated pain and limitations.

To date there have been many successes experienced by researchers who have utilised adult stem cells. In fact, adult stem cell research has provided many therapeutic benefits to patients, something that cannot be said about embryonic stem cell research. This in part has contributed to the main controversy surrounding the use of embryonic stem cells from embryos created artificially through the cloning process and surplus embryos left over from in vitro fertilization (IVF). The cells used are the inner cells of the blastocyst that develop in the first few days after fertilisation.

In most State jurisdictions, surplus IVF embryos are required to be destroyed within five years. Of course, this raises a serious ethical and practical issue: Instead of destroying these embryos, why not use them to benefit the lives of many others?

Focus on the Family Australia believes that a clear distinction needs to be made between allowing embryos to be disposed of with due respect to their humanity and the understanding of the purpose for which they were created (for infertile couples to have a child), versus allowing them to be created to be used at the will and disposal of researchers for scientific advancement.

Although appropriate guidelines and safeguards in Australia are being considered to prevent the cloning of human embryos, Focus on the Family Australia is concerned that these will in time be amended to meet the demands of a growing, profit-making biotech industry who justify the means to an end. Similarly, guidelines governing the IVF program have succumbed under constant pressure to change.

Without wanting to trivialise or minimise the pain of infertile couples that have been struggling unsuccessfully to have children, it was only a matter of time before new reproductive technologies would also be extended to accommodate alternative lifestyle choices. This raises further ethical and practical issues about the principles and processes that guide the application of such technologies. In many cases, these, along with scientific discoveries are outpacing our ability to make informed decisions about the long-term ramifications on society.

One of Focus on the Family Australia's guiding principles is respect for the sanctity of life. We hold that each and every life is sacred, a precious gift from God, beginning from the very moment of conception or fertilisation. We further maintain that each individual is of inestimable worth – regardless of race, creed, age, health, birth status or perceived utilitarian value to society. We reject the current prevailing ethos in some circles that certain lives are of greater value than others.

In the light of this, Focus on the Family Australia opposes the use of embryonic stem cell research from embryos created artificially through the cloning process and surplus embryos left over from in vitro fertilisation (IVF). We do, however, strongly support adult cell research.

Although we empathise for those who suffer disabilities and diseases and are committed to supporting them, we cannot condone research conducted on the most vulnerable members of our society today – the unborn children. In fact, Focus on the Family Australia is very much committed to the defence of the disadvantaged, the downtrodden and the defenceless.

Even though we appreciate the genuine endeavours of some of our leaders to find a position of balance on this issue, we are unable to water down the absolute priority of human life and for our unfaltering commitment to its rights.

In light of these considerations, Focus on the Family Australia calls on our government, as well as the medical and scientific communities, to abandon the use of stem cells from human embryos. Instead, they should resume their rightful roles as protectors and healers of all human life, both the born and the unborn. We also call for an increase of funding for adult stem cell research that to date has revealed a growing list of life-changing benefits.

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