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# REPORT



The Newsletter of the  
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

## New Developments in Stem Cell Research

Recently, research teams in Wisconsin and Japan announced the successful development of embryonic stem cells from human skin cells. According to lead scientist James A. Thomson of the UW-Madison, who pioneered human embryonic stem cell research in the late 1990s, the newly developed cells "do all the things embryonic stem cells do."

cell research that allow adult stem cells to be 'reprogrammed' to take on the capacities of embryonic stem cells. This is precisely the kind of science and research that the bishops have consistently advocated."

Mr. Huebscher continued, "We share Dr. Thomson's caution that more research is needed to

Applauding this breakthrough, Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, chairman of the

**Medical progress and respect for human life are not in conflict; they can and should support and enrich one another for the good of all.**

Committee for Pro-Life Activities at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, stated, "This technology avoids the many ethical landmines associated with embryonic stem cell research: it does not clone or destroy human embryos, does not harm or exploit women for their eggs, and does not blur the line between human beings and other species through desperate efforts to make human embryos using animal eggs."

The WCC issued a similar statement through its Executive Director, John Huebscher: "The Wisconsin Catholic Conference is pleased and encouraged by the announcement of successful new techniques in stem

determine how helpful the discovery announced today will be. Nonetheless, today's news from the UW-Madison appears to take us one day closer to the point where medical technology can serve human life without taking it in the process."

In his closing remarks, Cardinal Rigali stated that he was "grateful today for scientists who took up the challenge of finding morally acceptable ways to pursue stem cell research, and for government leaders who have encouraged and funded such avenues. This advance reminds us once again that medical progress and respect for human life are not in conflict; they can and should support and enrich one another for the good of all."

Fall 2007

Vol. 2007 No. 4

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## Director's Corner

John Huebscher, Executive Director

Advocating for a public policy is not neat and tidy. Today's supporter may be tomorrow's opponent. Certainly there is no assurance that the best argument or the "right" outcome will prevail. Sometimes the opposite is true. Human beings make laws and policies, and human beings make mistakes.

Sometimes the debate is short. We can present our position in a few visits, testimony, and phone calls, and the politicians respond, all in a matter of weeks. Other times, we engage an issue knowing very well that the final "victory" or outcome may be years away. Sometimes we advocate "for the next generation" in the hope that the values and viewpoints we affirm will be persuasive to the public at some point in the future.

The debate over the ethics and values that should govern stem cell research is an example of such longer-term advocacy. This debate is now at least a decade old. The Catholic stance that research should serve human life, rather than take life, has been a "hard sell" with many in the public. It has not been easy to persuade many of our fellow citizens and especially "opinion leaders" to see the humanity of embryos. Our message that the Church supports and encourages most stem cell research often gets lost in the din.

In such a context, Catholic advocates must "take the long view," recognizing that our position in the stem cell debate will not prevail with rushing speed, but only after a longer journey of persuasion.

Still, we have reason to be hopeful. This past Thanksgiving, researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and in Japan have achieved a much hoped for breakthrough. They have found a way to create stem cells, which have the same potential for flexibility as embryonic stem cells, from adult tissue. And they have done it without destroying embryos.

This development does not end the debate. Some will still contend that scientists have new lessons to learn from research that destroys embryos. But the debate is different now. And we have new hope that our advocacy "for the next generation" will ultimately bear fruit.

## Legislature Passes Budget

After a lengthy approval process in the legislature, the Governor signed the state's biennial budget into law on October 26, 2007. The following reviews items of interest to the Wisconsin Catholic Conference:

### Children and Families

The budget directs the Department of Commerce to distribute a total of \$2 million in transitional housing grants, thus providing a sizable increase in funding for homeless shelters. The budget also provides a five percent increase in reimbursement rates for foster care. These increases will significantly impact families and the service agencies, such as Catholic Charities, that assist them.

### Corrections

The budget expands the Earned Release Program, which provides substance abuse treatment for inmates while in a correctional facility, and allocates \$375,000 to Milwaukee County for its Treatment Alternatives and Diversion (a.k.a. TIP) programs.

In the budget, health services (especially for mental health) have been expanded at the Taycheedah facility through the addition of 33.25 staff positions. Another provision supplies \$1 million to organizations that provide civil legal services to the poor.

### Education

The budget provides payments to the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program that will cover the state's 55% contribution for projected enrollments over the next two years.

### Health Care

The budget provides \$127,000 in 2007-08 and \$31,463,100 in 2008-09 to implement BadgerCare Plus. Subject to approval by federal agencies, the BadgerCare Plus initiative will begin January 1, 2008, and will increase eligibility for the medical assistance (MA) benchmark plan; provide coverage for unborn children; increase eligibility for regular MA for pregnant woman and families with children; and include certain migrant workers, their dependents, and individuals under age 21 who have aged out of foster care.

While the budget raises the income eligibility requirements for the Family Planning Demonstration Project, it did not include a provision to extend the project to males.

## Bill Changes Rules for Abuse Claims

Late last month, Sen. Julie Lassa (D-Stevens Point) and Rep. Scott Suder (R-Abbotsford) introduced a proposal that would create a three-year window for claims against any offender, not just clergy, who have abused children in the past, no matter how long ago the abuse occurred. The proposal would also completely remove the statute of limitations for future civil actions against child abusers. Under the bill, any employer of an accused offender, including churches, could be sued for negligence for offenses committed decades ago.

The WCC is opposed to the bill. In explaining the WCC's position, Executive Director John Huebscher, pointed out that the WCC supported a 2004 law that allows civil actions to be brought against alleged child abusers until the victim turns 35 years of age.

But he added that the proposed bill goes much farther. Four years ago, the Attorney General suggested that it is unconstitutional to repeal a statute of limitations after the period of liability has expired. In addition, state law limits the liability of governmental entities (such as schools) to \$50,000 per claim. Churches and other private entities enjoy no such limits to their liabilities. Thus a child abused by a teacher in a Catholic school could be awarded millions by a jury, while a child abused by a public school employee could collect only \$50,000.

"The Catholic Church," Huebscher concluded, "is committed to assisting victims of abuse, even when the statute of limitations has run out. He noted that the Archdiocese of Milwaukee has reached monetary settlements with over 160 victims whose statutes of limitations had expired. "This process continues to be open to any victim who wishes to use it."

## Assembly Bans Coerced Abortion

In mid-September, the WCC testified in support of a bill sponsored by Wisconsin Right to Life to protect women who are being coerced into having an abortion. Assembly Bill 427 (Rep. Mark Gundrum, R-New Berlin) would require the physician who is to perform or induce the abortion to determine whether or not the woman has, in fact, freely and without coercion consented to the abortion. To do this, the physician would have to meet with the woman in a private room, away from anyone who may have accompanied her. The bill would also require the physician to inform the woman of domestic abuse services if she is being threatened with, or has been victimized by, domestic abuse. Finally, the bill would require the physician to provide the woman with a private phone if she wishes to call for assistance.

At the public hearing, WCC Associate Director Barbara Sella explained that moral responsibility for an abortion rarely rests on the woman alone. "All those who pressure or encourage a woman to rid herself of her child in a violent manner...share some responsibility."

Sella also added that additional efforts are needed to decrease the number of abortions. "Even as we support this bill, we recognize that much more will have to be done to help pregnant women who feel that abortion is their only option. We need a renewed sense of both personal responsibility and social responsibility to reduce the number of unplanned pregnancies and abortions."

AB 427 passed the Assembly on a bi-partisan vote of 65-32. However, it faces an uphill battle in the Senate where, to date, no public hearing has been scheduled.

**CAPITOL REPORT** is published quarterly by the WCC to inform Catholics and policy decision makers of the WCC's position on state and federal legislation and other WCC activities. Subscriptions are \$5 per calendar year.

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## WCC Supports Higher Penalties for Human Trafficking

The WCC supports two companion bills to criminalize the trafficking of human beings in Wisconsin.

Human trafficking involves using fraud, force, and coercion to sexually exploit or otherwise press into labor an unwilling person. Particularly common is the sexual exploitation of women and girls, whether in the prostitution, strip club, or pornography industries.

Globally, an estimated 700,000 people are victims of human trafficking, making it the third largest and fastest growing criminal industry in the world after arms trafficking and drug dealing. In the United States, an estimated 17,500 men, women, and children are trafficked every year. While these victims are mostly hidden from view, domestic abuse shelters and advocates against sexual assault are seeing an increased number of requests for assistance. Assembly Bill 544 (Rep. Suzanne Jeskewitz, R-Menomonee Falls) and Senate

Bill 292 (Sen. Spencer Coggs, D-Milwaukee) would designate human trafficking of an adult as a felony and impose a fine of up to \$100,000, imprisonment for up to 25 years, or both. For trafficking a child, the fine would be the same, but the prison sentence could be for up to 40 years.

in the state that knowingly engages in human trafficking.

In addition to these penalties, the bills would direct the state to provide some emergency services and assistance to victims of trafficking and ensure that they are protected from prosecution if they have been forced to commit a crime. Finally, they would require the state's Office of Justice Assistance to collect data

on the number and nature of violations related to human trafficking.

As WCC Associate Director for Respect Life and

Social Concerns, Barbara Sella, noted, "Human trafficking denies everything that a civilized society stands for and that Catholic social teaching espouses: the protection of human dignity and human rights; the preferential option for the poor; the call to family and community; the rights of workers; and solidarity. As a state and as a Church, we can and must stop this degradation."



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The bills would allow a court to order restitution for the victim's transportation, housing, child care, gross income provided in services, and relocation expenses (if necessary for the victim's safety). They would permit the state to revoke the business license or corporate charter of any business operating