

Serving All and Sacrificing None

Ethical Stem Cell Research

Questions and Answers

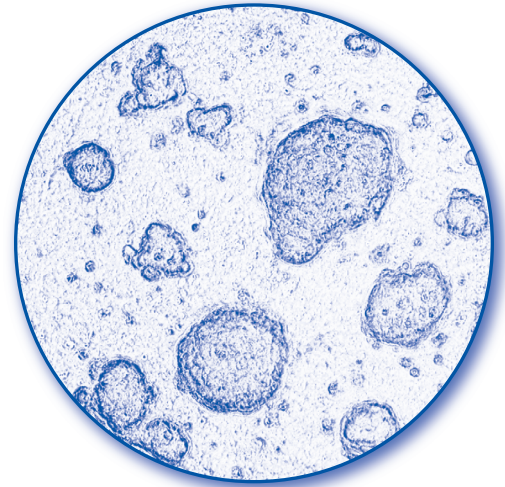


What is the essence of the controversy?

The controversy is about whether some human lives (embryos) can be sacrificed to benefit other human lives. In addition, there is the issue of whether tax revenues should be used to support research that some citizens consider immoral because it destroys human life.

What are stem cells and how can they be used?

In general, stem cells are unspecialized cells that have the ability to replicate indefinitely and to develop into more specialized cells. Some scientists believe that by removing stem cells from the embryo (thereby destroying the embryo), culturing them, and then programming them to become heart, pancreas, lung, or brain cells, etc., they can help heal diseased or damaged tissue in patients.



Stem cells

Are there scientific problems with embryonic stem cell research?

Yes. Because of their uncontrolled growth, embryonic stem cells can create tumors. Moreover, to date, no cures have come from embryonic stem cell research. In fairness, though, this is not unusual because the science is still in its infancy.

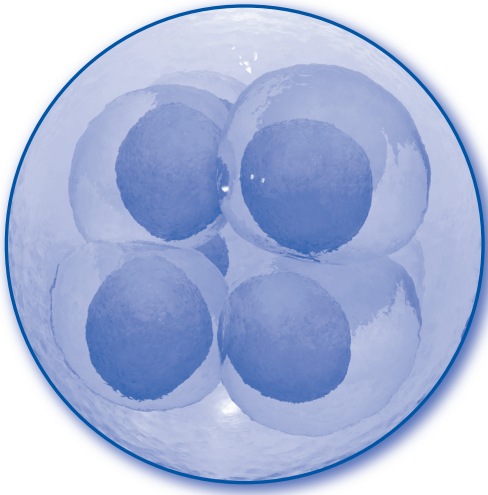
What are adult stem cells and are they effective in treating disease?

Adult stem cells are so-called because they are derived from humans after birth. They are found in the umbilical cord, placenta, bone marrow, muscle, fat, skin, etc. In contrast to embryonic stem cells, adult stem cells can be extracted without harming the donor. Adult stem cells have successfully treated leukemia, spinal cord injury, corneal damage, heart disease, and many other serious conditions.

Why do some scientists say that adult stem cell research is insufficient?

Because most adult stem cells are not as flexible as embryonic stem cells, they may be able to cure only a limited number of diseases. For this reason, some scientists maintain that research on embryonic stem cells must continue.

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Eight cell embryo

Why is the Catholic Church opposed to embryonic stem cell research?

The Church teaches that we may never do something evil or morally wrong, no matter how much good results or how much harm is avoided. Because the embryo is a human life, made in the image and likeness of God, we cannot destroy it, regardless of the benefits that could result from its destruction. From its inception, the Church has defended this principle in its strong condemnation of abortion.

Does this mean the Church is against science?

No. The Church teaches that God has given us the gift of science not only to improve the human condition, but also to come to know God the Creator by studying His creation. Science, however, is not a value-free endeavor. As the U.S. Bishops have pointed out, “the choice is not between science and ethics, but between science that is ethically responsible and science that is not.” Too often we have divorced science from ethics with catastrophic results (e.g., medical experiments in Germany and Japan during World War II, and syphilis research on African Americans in the U.S.).

Isn't the Church trying to impose its religious beliefs on society?

No. Although the Church's defense of the embryo and its emphasis on the sanctity of life is grounded in Scripture, its position is also based on natural law and science. Natural law, or human reason, tells us that we each have an inalienable right to life from which flow all the other rights we enjoy as human beings. Reason also tells us that we may never intentionally kill innocent human beings. Science tells us that the embryo is a developing human being with potential, not a potential human being. Within hours of fertilization, the zygote has a unique DNA profile, or “genetic blueprint,” that will direct the growth and development of this living human being through every stage of life.

But isn't the frozen embryo that will be discarded different from the embryo in the womb?

No. Whether frozen or in the womb, both embryos have the same make-up and share the same dignity. Our dignity as human beings is an inherent reality, independent of where we are or what our abilities are. We can never lose or forfeit this dignity.

But if the frozen embryos are going to be discarded anyway, doesn't the Church allow us to do the lesser of two evils and use them in potentially life-saving research?

No. Natural law never allows us to do moral evil, no matter how much good can come from it. We cannot harm the embryo now, just because someone may harm it later. In the same way, it would be

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unethical to remove vital organs from a dying patient in order to benefit another patient's life. We will all die some day, but that does not give anyone permission to kill us.

What does the Church suggest should be done with the countless number of frozen embryos?

The Church opposes the creation of human embryos in the lab, precisely because they are then treated as things and not as human beings. In addition, Pope John Paul II indicated that there is really no good moral solution to the existence of these frozen embryos.

Some of them have been "adopted" by women willing to implant the embryos and bring them to term. Realistically speaking, however, this would help only a very small fraction of frozen embryos.

The embryos could be kept frozen, but one must then ask how respect for human life is shown by keeping them in an indefinite state of suspended animation.

Some theologians have suggested the possibility of allowing the embryos to thaw and then, after death, giving them a proper burial. This, however, would be akin to removing life support and allowing a patient to die.

As the Pope indicated, all these solutions, although perhaps not immoral by nature, are less than ideal. However, what cannot be done is to destroy the embryos directly, as happens in embryonic stem cell research.

What can Catholics do in response to this issue?

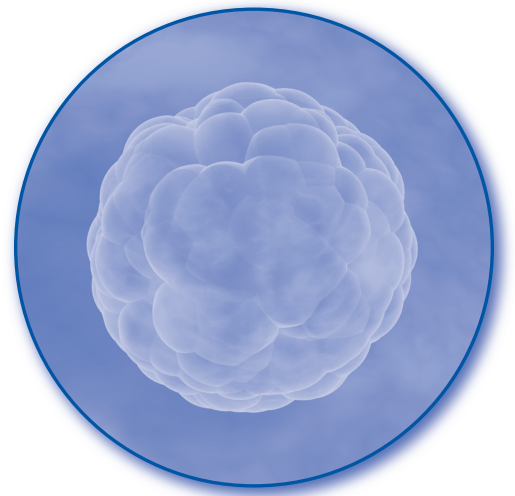
First, Catholics can become educated about the issue. This publication is a first step. The "Additional Resources" section at the end of this document directs readers to locations for more in-depth material.

Second, once educated, we can share the Church's teaching on the issue in a clear but sensitive manner.

Third, we can lobby legislators to support ethical research and oppose unethical research. While it is unlikely that our efforts will stop privately funded research, we can work to prevent our tax dollars from being used for this problematic experimentation.

Fourth, Catholics can choose to enter political life, not to impose the Catholic religion on constituents, but to advocate for and protect the inviolable dignity of all human life.

Finally, Catholics can continue to pray that as a society we will grow in our respect for all human life, whether it is a frozen embryo or a person afflicted with a serious disease.



Blastocyst

Embryonic Stem Cell Research

Additional Resources

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/bioethic/stemcell

National Catholic Bioethics Center
www.ncbcenter.org/stemcell.asp

Do No Harm: The Coalition of Americans for
Research Ethics
www.stemcellresearch.org

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