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Testimony Delivered to the National Bioethics Advisory Commission

by

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The National Catholic Bioethics Center, located on the campus of St. Elizabeth's Medical Center, in Boston, Massachusetts, has been in existence for over twenty-five years. We offer moral analysis on issues in medicine and the progress of the life sciences to interested Catholics and non-Catholics. My testimony here today represents the considered judgment of our staff of ethicists.

In keeping with our intellectual tradition, our Center is dedicated to the unity of faith and reason, to the compatibility of science and religion. Ours is a tradition that supports the progress of science. Catholics have contributed major scientific thinkers to Western science, including Gregor Mendel, a monk and the father of genetics. We are comfortable with the modern evolutionary theory. We do not believe that there should ever be conflict between science and religion so long as they are in the service of the human being.

In keeping with the Western ethical outlook, our Center holds that morality is objective; that the good exists in nature; and that reason has the task of seeking the good through reflection on nature. This view is widely held. We emphatically reject any claim that we bring to the *public* discussion the specifically religious teachings of our faith. Morality is evident to reason.

We recognize that embryonic stem cells have great potential for the cure of seriously debilitating human diseases. We do not agree, however, that retrieving these cells from the destruction of human embryos can be justified on the grounds that the resulting research will provide many medical and scientific benefits. We do not believe that one life can be expended to benefit another.

The recent ruling by the Director of Health and Human Services

[HHS], that federal funds may be used for research on stem cells from destroyed human embryos, appears to be an "end-run" around the Congressional ban on the federal funding of human embryo research. It seems obvious that the Congress intended to ban any research that necessitates the destruction of human embryos. The proposed research, however, not only requires the destruction of human embryos, but destroys them for the *express purpose* of obtaining their cells for scientific research. Our medical professions have a long tradition against non-consensual, non-therapeutic experimentation on human subjects. The manner in which embryonic stem cells are obtained is clearly not therapeutic for the embryos from which these cells are taken.

In the view of The National Catholic Bioethics Center, an individual human life comes into existence immediately at fertilization. It is surely human, although not fully developed. From a strictly scientific standpoint, there would appear to be no reason to think otherwise. The genetic code of the zygote possesses all that is necessary for complete human development. Moreover, the zygote functions as a unified organism. If allowed to develop, the human embryo can and will become an adult human being.

This is the basis of our opposition to the destruction of human embryos for the sake of obtaining pluripotent stem cells. To dissect a living human embryo in order to obtain cells for experimental research conjures up images of some of the worst abuses of human rights within recent history.

We understand that not all scientists share our point of view. Some hold that personal human life comes into existence at a later point in the developmental process—though often they cannot say clearly when that is. Some say that there is no human being in existence until after actual birth. Other scientists agree that there is a human being in existence from the earliest point of development, but also hold that its killing can be moral if that destruction will provide sufficient benefits to others. We find this latter view very disturbing, for it argues that one life can be expended for the sake of others.

You may or may not share our outlook. You may have no particular view on when human life begins. But whatever your views as members of this Commission, and whatever the views of HHS and the present administration, please remember in your deliberations that millions of your fellow citizens hold that a human embryo is a human life worthy of the protection of law. This is certainly a reasonable point of view and can be defended on non-religious grounds. As a nation of many and diverse viewpoints, the view that life begins at conception deserves the same respect accorded to any other reasoned position advanced on this very important topic.

The research that HHS has chosen to permit with federal funding

will allow the establishment of permanent stem cell lines, from which all future research and new therapies will derive. Unlike other cell lines, embryonic stem cells show the capacity for "immortality." If permanent stem cell lines are established that derive from the destruction of human embryos, in our view, all future research and all derived therapies will be similarly tainted. As a result of this tainted origin, many Americans who have deeply held moral objections to embryo destruction may choose not to receive any benefits from the new research.

Consider what this decision means to those who oppose the extracting of cells from human embryos. As the promising new therapies become available, these people will be forced to make a choice: either live in accord with the conviction that life begins at conception or alleviate the suffering of loved ones. This is a tragic choice that should not be forced upon any citizen.

The Department of Health and Human Services knows that many Americans are strongly opposed to the destruction of human embryos. Yet it proceeds to provide federal *tax-payer dollars* to establish embryonic stem cell lines derived from destroyed human embryos. How else can one interpret this decision except as a dismissal of the seriously held and reasonable moral convictions of many others? Such action could lead many citizens to perceive certain members of the scientific community as willing to advance their own research objectives at the expense of moral principle – or at least at the expense of the moral principles held by many American citizens.

We all agree on the need to fashion the best possible public policy for medicine and scientific research. From our point of view, however, we wonder why the federal government does not try to foster the kind of research that is morally acceptable to all of its citizens. Science is the universal instrument of reason. The benefits of scientific research ought to accrue to all people. Short of this possibility, however, we would ask that the federal government *not* support research that is guaranteed to cause moral division among the people.

Nor does the rush to use stem cells from destroyed human embryos seem a necessity for scientific progress. Many promising alternatives to the use of embryonic stem cells are regularly cited in the scientific literature. Recent research suggests that differentiated precursor stem cells from a patient's own body may prove more useful than embryonic stem cells.

From a medical point of view, therapies derived from these precursor stem cells would not suffer the disadvantage of possible rejection by the immune system. From a moral point of view, they would not suffer the disadvantage of having been taken through the intentional destruction of human embryos.