

Obama ends federal funding ban on stem cell research: Reverses Bush administration policy

News in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

With an executive order, President Obama made official what many scientists had long anticipated and many religious conservatives had long feared—he lifted his predecessor’s near-total ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.

“In recent years, when it comes to stem cell research, rather than furthering discovery, our government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values,” Obama said in a March 9 statement accompanying his executive order.

“In this case, I believe the two are not inconsistent. As a person of faith, I believe we are called to care for each other and work to ease human suffering. I believe we have been given the capacity and will to pursue this research—and the humanity and conscience to do so responsibly.”

Obama had been widely expected to reverse a policy, first instituted by President Bush seven and a half years ago, that severely limited the kinds of embryonic stem cell lines available for federally funded research. But Obama went further, with a memorandum accompanying the executive order that asked officials in his administration to institute policies to ensure that political pressure will not hinder the government’s decisions on matters of science.

Scientists have studied embryonic stem cells for more than a decade because of their potential to become any one of more than 200 types of tissues in the human body. The research, scientists say, has the potential to produce treatments and even cures for a wide array of injuries and degenerative conditions that are disabling and even fatal.

“At this moment, the full promise of stem cell research remains unknown, and it should not be overstated. But scientists believe these tiny cells may have the potential to help us understand, and possibly cure, some of our most devastating diseases and conditions,” Obama said.

However, such stem cell research has proven highly controversial, because human embryos are destroyed in the process of harvesting the stem cells.

In addition, some scientists have proposed cloning human embryos from patients with certain diseases. Such cloning would prevent rejection of any new tissues or organs grown from the stem cells and used for those patients.

Religious conservatives—and many nonreligious bioethicists—find both prospects ethically troubling. Some conservatives consider destruction of five-day-old embryos as tantamount to abortion.

Supporters of the research—and polls consistently show large majorities of the public and of professional biologists in favor of it—counter that it is done with frozen embryos that would otherwise be discarded because they are by-products of fertility treatments.

Obama’s memorandum instructed White House officials to “develop recommendations for presidential action designed to guarantee scientific integrity throughout the executive branch” on science-policy decisions.

The Bush administration was regularly criticized by scientific groups for decisions in science-related areas—such as stem cell research, global warming, teenage sex education and HIV-prevention efforts—that seemed influenced more by conservative political ideology than the latest research and the scientific community’s consensus on those issues.

Obama said he issued the memorandum to make certain “that in this new administration, we base our public policies on the soundest science; that we appoint scientific advisers based on their credentials and experience, not their politics or ideology; and that we are open and honest with the American people about the science behind our decision.” *Robert Marus, Associated Baptist Press*