

The line on stem cells: Obama's middle way

From the Editors in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

Activists on both sides were disappointed when the Obama administration revealed its policy on embryonic stem cell research last month. The guidelines issued by the National Institutes of Health are “not bold enough,” in the view of the *New York Times*. But to the Family Research Council actions permitted under the guidelines will “destroy human life.”

The new rules expand government funding for research on so-called spare embryos left over from in-vitro fertilization (IVF) clinics—embryos created for reproductive purposes but now slated to be destroyed. Whereas President Bush allowed government-funded research only on stem cell lines established before August 9, 2001, Obama discards that arbitrary cutoff date and opens up the use of thousands of new embryos for research. But the new rules maintain the Bush administration’s policy of denying funding for research that uses human embryos created for purposes of research.

The Obama approach has been both touted and derided as a compromise position, and it probably does represent the position with the broadest support in Congress and public opinion. But it also represents the principled view that an ethical line is crossed when a human embryo is treated purely instrumentally as an object of research.

The NIH guidelines also tighten consent requirements for use of embryos. They require that when donors give written consent there be “a clear separation” between the donors’ decision to create human embryos for reproductive purposes and their decision to donate those embryos for research. The rules demand that donors not be coerced into allowing their embryos to be objects of research.

The details of the consent rules are significant, for they prevent the research imperative from swamping the original reproductive goal. The consent framework maintains respect for the embryo as nascent human life. The parents, after all, did

not create the embryos so they could be used for research. Parents of a terminally ill child may authorize doctors to extract organs for donation when death is imminent. Similarly, couples who have undergone infertility treatments are now allowed to authorize scientists to extract stem cells from unused embryos before those embryos are discarded.

One can see by contrast the very different moral situation that arises when scientists create embryos solely for research. Those embryos are, from the beginning, merely objects of research. That step represents a different level of moral hazard. Obama's caution is warranted.