

White House takes centrist step on stem cell research: Only surplus embryos from infertility treatments

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The Obama administration has clarified its policy on embryonic stem cell research, issuing draft guidelines to expand federal funding for the controversial research but retaining a ban on funding for its most ethically fraught versions.

The proposed guidelines, released April 17 by the National Institutes of Health, are likely to enable a vast expansion of federally funded research on embryonic stem cells.

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 for a wide array of injuries and degenerative conditions that are disabling and can even be fatal.

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

President Bush effectively banned federal funding for new embryonic stem cell research shortly after he took office. Obama, following a campaign promise, signed an executive order March 9 rescinding the Bush policy. Nonetheless, Obama's order did not specifically address some practical concerns about exactly what kinds of research the government would fund. The NIH proposal—to be submitted to a public-input process and review period before being finalized in midsummer—further fleshes out the administration's policies.

The new guidelines take a centrist approach, allowing funding only for research on surplus embryos from fertility treatments that parents have donated. The proposal continues to ban funding for research on embryos that were created specifically for

research purposes.

The proposals would also continue to ban research on cloned embryos, which some scientists have argued is an important and necessary area of study. For certain diseases, they argue, the process— which clones an embryo from the patient being treated and uses its stem cells to grow replacement tissues—would prevent the patient’s body from rejecting the tissues.

Because of the limitations remaining, some antiabortion religious leaders are welcoming the NIH draft guidelines as a mediating approach.

“They have hit the right balance by limiting funding to particular slated-to-be-destroyed IVF cells, yet expanding significantly the number of diseases that can be addressed by increasing the number and range of stem cell lines from which we can learn,” said Joel Hunter, pastor of an Orlando-area megachurch.

The Catholic Church opposes embryonic stem cell research, but Stephen Schneck, director of Catholic University’s Life Cycle Institute, called the draft rules “a major step toward the common ground most Americans are now demanding.”

Former Southern Baptist Convention president Frank Page, in a statement, said the decision is not the one conservative Christians wanted most—a total ban on stem cell research—but is better than it could have been.

Like Hunter, Page is a member of President Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. *-Associated Baptist Press, Ecumenical News Service*