

Jeffrey Kahn: Stem-cell policy: a stark choice

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Science matters -- that's a lesson taught a generation ago by Mr. Wizard and more recently by Bill Nye the Science Guy. The same lesson is playing out in this presidential election, as embryonic stem-cell research policy occupies a prominent place in the campaign.

Three years ago this week, President George W. Bush announced his administration's policy regarding public funding for embryonic stem-cell research. In short, the policy allowed public funding for research on all the human embryonic stem-cell colonies (or lines) that existed on that date -- eventually reported to be 72 lines in all.

In a compromise, Bush allowed limited research to go forward while promising that no new embryos would be used in stem-cell research involving federal funds, a decision based in part on his position regarding the moral status of human embryos -- that they should be viewed as human beings and therefore deserve protections. To be consistent on such a view, however, would seem to argue for an outright ban on all research on embryos, public or private.

A total ban is much harder to accomplish, requiring legislative action by Congress before the president could sign it into law. While some have argued that stem-cell research funding is at its highest levels ever, such a claim is misleading.

Nearly two years after the discovery of human embryonic stem cells in 1998, President Bill Clinton directed the NIH to move forward with what would have been much more permissive rules for federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research. The election of 2000 put a stop to any funding until Bush could issue his own rules, culminating in the announcement of research restrictions in August 2001.

Three years later, the Bush policy has limited research in very real and important ways. Far fewer than the original 72 cell lines are available for research. The NIH puts the number at about 20, and those lines are quickly becoming the equivalent of using aging technology in an area of science that measures its rapidly advancing milestones of understanding in months rather than years.

Three years later, we are falling behind in the stem-cell race. Much cutting-edge science is taking place in parts of the world with fewer restrictions than in our own country: England, Sweden, Korea, Singapore and others. And the administration's promise that private sector investment would pick up where public funding stopped has proven to be a hard sell.

Three years later, while Bush continues to defend a policy that protects embryos as if they had the same rights as the rest of us, many Americans (even Nancy Reagan) believe that the gains from embryonic stem-cell research can be achieved in ethically acceptable ways, such as by using some of the 400,000 embryos left over from couples using in vitro fertilization for reproductive purposes.

There is broad bipartisan support in Congress for easing stem-cell research limits, and John Kerry has pledged to reverse the restrictions.

Three years later, the bigger question is whether science funding and science policy should be driven by expertise or ideology. Never before have the "culture wars" had such impact on science policymaking, with increasing evidence that appointments to federal advisory panels as well as eventual policies across a wide range of issues are being informed not by scientific evidence and by those with relevant expertise, but by political ideology.

Three years later, whose vision of science and stem-cell research is right for our country? Voters are paying attention to stem-cell research policy this election because the choice is stark and the stakes are real.

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