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Nicanor Austriaco

Providence College, naustria@providence.edu

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COMMENTARY

Stem cell order was immoral and unnecessary

BY FATHER NICANOR AUSTRIACO, O.P., PH.D.

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On Monday, March 9, 2009, President Obama signed an executive order that not only overturned his predecessor's funding restrictions for embryonic stem cell research (ESCR) but also rescinded the Bush initiative (Executive Order 13435 of June 20, 2007) that explicitly mandated federal funding for alternative methods of stem cell research that would avoid the destruction of human embryos.

Obama's executive order was not only immoral but also scientifically unnecessary.

First, as the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights acknowledged, every human being has an inherent or intrinsic dignity. This type of dignity is not conferred or earned. It is a dignity that is simply recognized and is attributed to every human being, whether he is an embryo, a fetus, a toddler, or a teenager, regardless of any other considerations or claims. It is also a dignity that can only be possessed in an absolute sense – one either has it completely or does not have it at all – since one is either a human being or not one at all.

There is no such thing as partial human dignity since there is no such thing as a partial human being. Because of this intrinsic dignity, the life of a human being is sacred. It is worthy of respect and has to be protected from all unjust attack, including those attacks that come from scientists who want to destroy the human embryo to harvest his stem cells. President Obama's executive order now permits such attacks and is therefore immoral.

Next, proponents of stem cell research have suggested that the "surplus" embryos that remain in cold storage at IVF clinics should be made available to scientists working to obtain embryonic stem cells, especially since many of these "spare" embryos are already destined for destruction. In response, would we be morally justified if we proposed that terminally ill children in pediatric oncology units should be made available to scientists who would kill them to study their diseased organs, especially since these kids are already destined for death? Of course not! Until he dies, the human being, whether he or she is an embryo or a child, has an intrinsic dignity that needs to be respected. Therefore, even if he is about to die, the human being cannot be killed, even if killing him would lead to the cure of a chronic disease. President Obama's executive order now permits such killing and is therefore immoral.

Third, the presidential executive order specifically did not close the door to the creation and destruction of human embryos solely for research purposes. For the first time, federal funds could be used for the creation of human beings solely as a means to an end. As even the philosopher Immanuel Kant would affirm, this possibility, and therefore the executive order that would permit it, is immoral.

Fourth, the discovery and development of induced pluripotent stem cell (iPS) technology, the process that transforms adult skin or other cells into pluripotent stem cells that are practically indistinguishable from embryonic stem cells, allows scientists to find cures and study diseases in a more efficient and less controversial manner than ESCR. Ironically, the Jaenisch Laboratory at M.I.T. reported – just one week before President Obama signed his executive order! – that they had invented a safe way to create patient-specific iPS cells that brings this technology one step closer to human clinical trials. President Obama claimed that his directive would promote embryonic stem cell research and retire words like “terminal” and “incurable” from our vocabulary by providing cures for life-threatening diseases. However, induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cell research has the same therapeutic potential without the moral controversy. Scientifically, therefore, the Obama executive order was unnecessary.

Finally, it is likely that iPS technology and other moral avenues of research like it – research that President Obama’s order now implicitly discourages – would not have been pursued if all available funds had been channeled into embryo research. Prof. Shinya Yamanaka, who discovered iPS cells, has admitted that he pursued this novel and groundbreaking line of research because he wanted to avoid destroying the human embryos that reminded him of his daughters! Thus, in cultivating and funding alternative stem cell methods to create patient-specific stem cells that can now be tested in human clinical trials, President Bush’s executive orders were in fact pro-science and pro-patient. In the end, President Obama claimed that his own stem cell executive order was amoral and scientifically necessary. It was neither.

Father Nicanor Austriaco, O.P., is an assistant professor of biology and an instructor of theology at Providence College. He also serves as a staff ethicist at the Dominican Friars Health Care Ministry of New York and an advisor to Rhode Island Right to Life.