

Reframing the Politics of Stem Cell Research

The debate in the United States over stem cell research has been framed almost entirely as an extension of the “embryo wars.” It has come to pit fundamentalist conservatives who want to ban all research on human embryos against scientists and biotech entrepreneurs who resist even reasonable social oversight and regulation.

This polarization has given us the worst of both worlds. On the one hand, federal funding for legitimate stem cell research remains inadequate. On the other, scientists and the biotech industry are using state ballot initiatives and other routes to create lavishly funded stem cell programs that lack basic oversight and control.

Meanwhile, the “embryo-centric” framing of the stem cell debate has deflected attention from numerous important social and political issues raised by stem cell research.

We need a fuller and more nuanced approach to the politics of stem cell research, one that supports federal funding of this potentially important area of medical research, while strongly affirming the need for effective oversight of a powerful technology that holds risks as well as promise.

Issues that need to be addressed

- **Health equity:** ensuring that research is directed at treatments likely to be widely affordable, and that provisions to ensure accessibility of any eventual treatments are included in all stem cell programs.
- **Protecting the health of research subjects,** including women recruited to provide eggs for research. Egg extraction puts women at risk of adverse reactions, and a growing demand for eggs could create an exploitative market served by economically vulnerable women.
- **Scientific integrity** in the face of intense commercial pressures. Increasingly, medical researchers are also biotech entrepreneurs.
- **Public accountability and transparency:** stem cell programs must ensure that commercial interests do not inappropriately influence research priorities, and that the full range of social stakeholders are represented on stem cell program oversight bodies.
- **Scientific responsibility** in the face of temptations to over-promise cures. The lure of fame and fortune has already generated perhaps the worst scientific scandal in recent history, when Hwang Woo Suk lied to the press, his peers, and his government about his stem cell and cloning work.
- **Precaution and effective regulation** in the face of technologies with “brave new world” implications. Regulation and oversight is needed to prevent stem cell techniques developed for therapeutic purposes from being used by rogue scientists intent on creating human clones and genetically modified children.

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