IN THE NEWS: OBAMA'S STEM CELL MOVE

Researchers have welcomed the decision by Barack Obama to allow US federal funding of human embryonic stem cell research. "The removal of a barrier that has stood in our way for 8 years will open important new areas of research, and move the field forward more rapidly," says Douglas Melton, co-Director of the Harvard Stem Cell Institute (*Guardian*, 9 March 2009). Melton plans to collaborate with publicly funded scientists to develop treatments for conditions such as Parkinson disease and Alzheimer disease.

Predictably, anti-abortion campaigners were equally vociferous in their condemnation of the decision. "The administration now steps onto a ... very slippery slope. Many researchers will never be satisfied only with the so-called leftover embryos," says Douglas Johnson, Legislative Director for the National Right to Life Committee (*NY Times*, 10 March 2009).

Further ammunition for opponents of human embryo research was provided by a report, published in *PLoS Medicine* (February 2009), of the development of a donor-derived brain tumor in a 13-year-old boy who received neural stem cell transplants to treat ataxia telangiectasia. Stem Cells, Inc., a biotechnology company specializing in stem cell-based therapeutics for CNS disease, rapidly distanced themselves from the case. "It would be unfortunate ... if results from isolated and uncontrolled transplants were to color people's perceptions of the prospects of cell transplantation," says Stephen Huhn, Vice President and Head of the CNS Program (*NY Times*, 20 February 2009).

Obama acknowledges that "...the full promise of stem cell research remains unknown and it should not be overstated" (*BBC News*, 9 March 2009). Nevertheless, he believes "[most Americans] have come to a consensus that we should pursue this research; that the potential it offers is great, and with proper guidelines and strict oversight the perils can be avoided" (*NY Times*, 10 March 2009).

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