

Obama wrestled with ethics of stem cell research

NCR Staff | Mar. 25, 2009



President Obama, during his press conference March 24th, said he has wrestled with the morality of embryonic stem cell research and abortion and does not take these issues lightly. He said strong moral guidelines are needed in these areas.

The following is a transcript of an exchange with a reporter that elicited his comments.

In your remarks on stem cell research earlier this month, you talked about a majority consensus in determining whether or not this is the right thing to do, to federally fund embryonic stem cell research. I'm just wondering, though, how much you personally wrestled with the morality or ethics of federally funding this kind of research, especially given the fact that science so far has shown a lot of progress with adult stem cells, but not a lot with embryonic?

OK. No, I think it's -- I think it's a legitimate question. I -- I wrestle with these issues every day.

As I mentioned to -- I think in an interview a couple of days ago, by the time an issue reaches my desk, it's a hard issue. If it was an easy issue, somebody else would have solved it and it wouldn't have reached me. Look, I believe that it is very important for us to have strong moral guidelines, ethical guidelines, when it comes to stem cell research or anything that touches on, you know, the issues of possible cloning or issues related to, you know, the human life sciences.

I think those issues are all critical, and I've said so before. I wrestle with it on stem cell; I wrestle with it on issues like abortion.

I think that the guidelines that we provided meet that ethical test. What we have said is that, for embryos that are typically -- about to be discarded, for us to be able to use those in order to find cures for Parkinson's or for Alzheimer's or, you know, all sorts of other debilitating diseases, juvenile diabetes, that -- that it is the right thing to do.

And that's not just my opinion. That is the opinion of a number of people who are also against abortion.

Now, I am glad to see progress is being made in adult stem cells. And if the science determines that we can completely avoid a set of ethical questions or political disputes, then that's great.

I have -- I have no investment in causing controversy. I'm happy to avoid it if that's where the science leads us. But what I don't want to do is predetermine this based on a very rigid ideological approach, and that's what I think is reflected in the executive order that I signed.

I meant to ask -- just to follow up -- do you think that scientific consensus is enough to tell us what we can and cannot do?

No. I think there's -- there's always an ethical and a moral element that has to be -- be a part of this. And so, as I said, I -- I don't take decisions like this lightly. They're ones that I take seriously, and -- and I respect people who have different opinions on this issue.

But I think that this was the right thing to do and the ethical thing to do. And as I said before, my hope is, is that we can find a mechanism, ultimately, to cure these diseases in a way that gains 100 percent consensus. And we certainly haven't achieved that yet, but I think on balance this was the right step to take.

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