

Cardinal criticizes expanded NIH funding rules for stem-cell research

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Jul. 8, 2009

WASHINGTON -- The head of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities said final guidelines for funding human embryonic stem-cell research are "even broader" than the draft guidelines issued by the National Institutes of Health and he asked Americans to contact their members of Congress, "urging them not to codify or further expand this unethical policy."

In a statement issued late July 7, Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia also criticized NIH for ignoring "the comments of tens of thousands of Americans opposing the destruction of innocent human life for stem-cell research."

"Even comments filed by the Catholic bishops' conference and others against specific abuses in the draft guidelines were not addressed," he added. "Existing federal law against funding research in which human embryos are harmed or destroyed is not given due respect here."

In a telephone briefing with the media July 6, the day before the final guidelines took effect, NIH acting director Dr. Raynard S. Kington said 30,000 of the approximately 49,000 comments received by NIH during a monthlong period of public comment opposed any federal funding of such research.

But those responses were "deemed not responsive to the question put forth," Kington said. "We did not ask them whether" to fund such research, "but how it should be funded."

Richard M. Doerflinger, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, said it was "disingenuous (for Kington) to say that comments criticizing the guidelines overall were to be ignored."

The 30,000 individuals or organizations that made comments in opposition to federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research were saying, "You're not responding to what the American people want. Start over," Doerflinger added.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and its affiliated organization, the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment, directed 9,436 comments to NIH about the draft guidelines before the May 26 close of the public comment period, according to Deirdre A. McQuade, assistant director for policy and communications in the pro-life secretariat.

NIH's final guidelines are not significantly different from the draft guidelines published April 23 and open for public comment until May 26.

The draft guidelines allowed the use of federal funds for embryonic stem-cell research only on embryos created for reproductive purposes at in vitro fertilization clinics and no longer needed for that purpose. They set standards for voluntary informed consent by those donating the embryos, and said no NIH funds would be given for research that did not meet the standards.

The final guidelines, however, set up an "alternative pathway" for approval of funding of research involving embryos donated before the new guidelines took effect or involving stem-cell lines developed in foreign countries. A working group made up of about 10 scientists and ethicists will look at each such application on a case-by-case basis, Kington said, to determine whether it meets "the core principles of voluntary informed consent."

Like the draft, the final guidelines specifically ban funding for "research using human embryonic stem cells derived from other sources, including somatic cell nuclear transfer, parthenogenesis and/or IVF embryos created for research purposes."

Also prohibited is funding of research in which stem cells "are introduced into nonhuman primate blastocysts" or research "involving the breeding of animals where the introduction of human embryonic stem cells or human-induced pluripotent stem cells may contribute to the germ line."

The final guidelines also call for the establishment of "a new registry listing human embryonic stem cells eligible for NIH-funded research."

Among the requirements for informed consent set by the guidelines are:

- No payments for donated embryos.
- "All options available in the health care facility where treatment was sought pertaining to the embryos" have been explained to the donor or donors.
- The researcher must not influence donors' decisions and should not be the same person as the attending physician "unless separation was not practicable."
- Donors must be told that the embryos will be used for stem-cell research, that the donors will receive no commercial or direct medical benefit from the donation, that the embryos may be kept for many years and that they can withdraw consent at any time until the embryos are used.

But Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, said supporters of embryonic stem-cell research "hide behind ethical requirements to justify using tax dollars for destroying nascent human life."

"Such guidelines beg the question: If there is no moral dimension to destroying human embryos, why is there a need for ethics rules?" Donohue said in a July 7 statement. "While the answer is obvious to people who understand that life begins at conception, advocates of embryo destruction give lip service to ethics while simultaneously pretending that there is no moral issue."

Rigali said the debate over embryonic stem-cell research "now shifts to Congress, where some members have said even this policy does not go far enough in treating some human beings as objects to be created, manipulated and destroyed for others' use."

"I hope Americans concerned about this issue will write to their elected representatives, urging them not to codify or further expand this unethical policy," he added.

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