

New Jersey Catholic Conference

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STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF NEW JERSEY ON HUMAN STEM CELL RESEARCH (S1909/A2840)

We, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, oppose S1909/A2840 insofar as it permits research involving the derivation and use of human embryonic stem cells derived from “excess” human embryos stored at in vitro fertilization clinics or from cloning, i.e. somatic cell nuclear transplantation. We have great compassion for those who suffer from illnesses and look to such research to cure or otherwise treat their disease, and that is why we support research on adult stem cells. Adult stem cells come from adult tissue, placentas, or umbilical cord blood and can be retrieved without harming the donor. The only way to obtain embryonic stem cells, however, is to kill the living human embryo. Adult stem cells have helped hundreds of thousands of patients, and new clinical uses expand almost weekly. By contrast, embryonic stem cells have not helped a single human patient or demonstrated any therapeutic benefit.

The sanctity and dignity of human life, a cornerstone of Catholic moral and social teaching, demands respect for all human life, especially in its most vulnerable stages and conditions. Not only do the creation and destruction of human embryonic stem cells violate the sanctity of human life, but they also violate a central tenet of all civilized codes on human experimentation beginning with the Nuremberg Code. In effect, these acts approve doing deadly harm to a member of the human species solely for the sake of potential benefit to others. We believe it is more important than ever to stand for the principle that government must not treat any living human being as research material, as a mere means for benefit to others. Research that relies on the destruction of some defenseless human being for the possible benefit to others is morally unacceptable. We do not want a world where life is a commodity, manufactured and destroyed at will to serve others.

It is for these reasons that research on discarded or excess embryos stored at in vitro fertilization clinics should not be permitted. Embryology textbooks tell us that in biological terms the embryo is a human being. Testimony of modern science is clear on this point: at the moment the sperm cell of the human male meets the ovum of the female and a union results in the fertilized ovum (zygote), a new life has begun.

Equally offensive and morally intolerable is that this legislation also includes somatic cell nuclear transplantation in the definition of research that would be permitted in New Jersey. What used to be called “cloning” is now known as “somatic cell nuclear transfer.” The President’s Council on Bioethics unanimously agreed that life made in a successful somatic cell nuclear transplant cloning procedure is a human embryo. This legislation will allow the creation of cloned human beings to be implanted into a uterus at the embryonic stage and grown up until the ninth month of gestation for the express purpose of destroying them in order to harvest their organs and cells. Although the legislation purports to criminalize the cloning of a human being, that crime would not occur until the child is at least weeks, if not months

old, since the definition of cloning “means the replication of a human individual by cultivating a cell with genetic material through the egg, embryo, fetal and newborn stages into a new human individual.” (Sec. 3 of S1909) Since the only way to “cultivate” an embryo so long is by implantation in a woman’s womb, the legislation expressly authorizes payment for “implantation” and “transplantation” of embryos. It is assumed that a contract between a cloning entrepreneur and a gestating woman will specify the stage of pregnancy at which the woman agrees to have an abortion and then turn over “cadaveric fetal tissue” to the entrepreneur. (Sec. 2.c(1))

This legislation contains a legislative finding and declaration that “publicly funded research will be essential to realizing the promise of stem cell research and maintaining this State’s leadership in biomedicine and biotechnology.” (Sec. 1(f)) We believe that this legislation poses profound moral questions, not the least of which is whether State government should subsidize and force morally opposed taxpayers to subsidize research that requires the destruction of innocent human life. We hope and pray that the Legislature and State officials will answer that question in the negative and will unite instead to support promising medical research on adult stem cells that everybody can live with.

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