

Bush preparing to axe vital medical research into stem cells

Frank Gaglioti
13 January 2001

Even before George W. Bush has taken office, his press secretary Ari Fleischer signalled on January 4 that the new US administration would probably axe public funding for groundbreaking medical research using stem cells. Clinton only gave the go-ahead last August for public financial support through the National Institute of Health (NIH) for the research. Previously only privately funded research had been allowed.

The announcement is an early indication that the Bush administration will move to implement the reactionary agenda of the Christian fundamentalist lobby with serious consequences for science and medicine. Scientists obtain the stem cells for their research from discarded embryos produced during in vitro fertilisation programs—a process the Christian ultra right regard as equivalent to abortion and murder.

At a press conference Fleischer quoted a statement made by Bush during the presidential campaign that he would “oppose federally funded research for experimentation on embryonic stem cells that require live human embryos to be discarded or destroyed.”

Bush spokesman Scott McClelland added: “The President-elect's position is clear. He opposes federal funds for research that involves destroying living human embryos... As we have previously indicated, we intend to review all rules and executive orders implemented by the Clinton administration.”

Bush's nomination of Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson to the cabinet position of head of the Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees the National Institute of Health, also indicates a hard line on stem cell research and other issues such as abortion. Thompson is notorious for introducing far reaching anti-abortion legislation in Wisconsin. Purportedly aimed at banning late term abortions, the law had the effect of halting most abortion procedures

because of its all-embracing wording.

The 1998 Wisconsin law describes abortion as a procedure meant to “kill a child” and defines a foetus as a human being from the moment of conception. Thus an abortion is tantamount to murder and any doctor performing abortions faces a life sentence. Such wording would also have the effect of banning stem cell research, as the harvesting of stem cells involves “murdering” the embryo.

At last year's Republican Party National Convention, Thompson headed the platform committee, which adopted an anti-abortion resolution stating that “the unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed.”

Some scientists have already expressed fears about the future of the research. Dr. John Gearhart, a leading stem cell researcher from Johns Hopkins University, said “whether it's Mr Bush or Mr Thompson, with the conservative bent on this, one has reason to be concerned.”

The research has the potential to cure a number of degenerative diseases such as Lou Gehrig, Alzheimer and Parkinson disease. Stem cells have the extraordinary ability to transform themselves into any other type of body cells, given the right conditions. Scientists are examining the possibilities of using cell cultures to produce tissues and even organs for transplants. Such transplant material would have the advantage of being produced from cells taken from the patient, thus avoiding complications of tissue rejection.

Although the National Institute of Health is currently vetting research proposals for federal funding, private companies currently undertake most stem cell research in the US. The US company Geron Corp is using stem cells to produce cardiomyocytes, a component of heart muscle, that could possibly lead to a treatment for

degenerative heart disease. Osiris Therapeutics is conducting clinical tests of a mixture of stem cells that may assist in the recovery of bone marrow transplant patients, the rebuilding of aging bones and the repair of damaged cartilage.

European countries are moving rapidly to encourage the research. Italian health Minister Umberto Veronesi accepted a scientific report recommending human stem cell cloning at the end of last year. Italy followed closely on the heels of Britain, which recently passed legislation allowing early-stage embryos to be used for research, overturning the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. The law previously only permitted research using human embryos for purposes related to infertility, and for a limited period of 14 days. Sweden already allows stem cell research.

Although US scientists working in the field have achieved a number of outstanding scientific and medical breakthroughs, the previous lack of public funding has meant that they have had to work for pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies. But by its very nature stem cell research is long-term and very few therapeutic treatments have even reached the stage of clinical trials.

As a result biotechnology companies have made very little profit so far and their future is looking shaky. The stock price of Geron, considered the leading company in the field, has plummeted 70 percent since a record high of \$78 last March. The company has recently been forced to establish a partnership with New Jersey-based drug manufacturer Pharmacia and Swiss pharmaceutical giant Roche.

A decision by the Bush administration to cut off public funding for stem cell research could have a catastrophic impact in the US where the majority of the work in this field has been done to date.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact