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UD Medical Ethicist Says Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research a Case of Sacrificing One Form of Life in Order to Aid Another

University of Dayton

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NEWS RELEASE

UD MEDICAL ETHICIST SAYS HUMAN EMBRYONIC STEM CELL RESEARCH A CASE OF SACRIFICING ONE FORM OF LIFE IN ORDER TO AID ANOTHER

DAYTON, Ohio — President Bush is struggling with the question of regulating human embryonic stem cell research.

Therese Lysaught is not.

"What is the moral question here?" asks Lysaught, a medical ethicist and University of Dayton associate professor of religious studies. "It is not only one of the moral status of the embryo. It is also a question of who *we* are as moral agents and as a society."

Lysaught adds, "Our actions affect not only another person or creature, they affect our own character."

The president must soon decide whether to permit federal funds for medical research on stem cells pulled from human embryos. These cells are the basic building blocks for tissue, but to extract them for research requires destroying the embryo — an action the Catholic Church and many others see as taking a human life.

"We think there is something deeply disturbed, something deeply inhuman about a person who is cruel or abusive to an animal," says Lysaught, author of several professional papers on the subject, including "Holy Grail or Pandora's Box: Evaluating Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research" (*The World and I* magazine, Sept.-Oct. 1999). "But what sorts of persons do we become morally if we institutionalize a practice whereby we routinely sacrifice one form of human life in order to aid another?"

And what about the debate as to whether human embryos constitute life? Those who believe they do not are engaging in "some of the worst examples of political and philosophical sophistry that (society) has seen in a long time," Lysaught says.

"Contrary to some recent attempts to re-describe them as 'not living,' embryos are human life," she says. "Human embryos are distinctly different than ova and sperm; they're distinctly different than any other sort of human tissue. If placed in the proper context — as all living beings require — they will develop and grow into living, breathing, independent adults, under their own internal, directive power."

Lysaught is especially roused by some of Bush's conservative Republican colleagues who espouse to being both pro-life *and* pro-human embryonic stem cell research.

"This is nothing more than a transparent charade," says Lysaught, who teaches

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bioethics at UD and has served on the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee of the National Institutes of Health. "Certainly, we also want to be the type of persons who respond with compassion to the suffering of others and who actively work to fight illness and promote healing. This is central to the Christian tradition."

In January Britain became the first country to legalize the creation of cloned human embryos, a decision Lysaught said at the time could influence the way the U.S. addresses similar issues.

"(Britain's) was a case of economic interests overriding moral concerns or respect for human life. What is troubling about this development is that researchers are now allowed to actually create human embryos for research and tissue development."

Lysaught says that once such techniques are legalized, they eventually make their way to the free market to be used for any application.

"Researchers will discover non-therapeutic applications of stem cells or the use of human embryos and seek to parlay them into profitable commodities. Eventually, we will have full-blown human cloning.

"In Britain, as in the U.S., groups justify human embryo research by repeatedly stating that the human embryo must be respected," Lysaught says. "It is difficult to construe the manipulation, harvesting, freezing, genetic tampering, cloning and subsequent destruction of embryos as respectful."

Lysaught compares the current debate over human embryonic research to the argument over physician-assisted suicides, and discusses their relationship to the moral relevance of the Catholic Church's argument against abortion.

"When those who care deeply about human life in all its manifestations seek to offer alternatives — like pursuing research and development with placental or adult stem cells or pursuing pain management and palliative care in the case of physician-assisted suicides — they are met with the argument that human embryonic stem cell research and physician-assisted suicide are necessary in order to relieve or eliminate suffering; that it is easier, cheaper and more efficient; and if the gamete donors (or patient) have given informed consent, then the requirements of autonomy have been met," Lysaught says.

"But with human embryonic stem cell research, we again meet the argument first advanced with Roe v. Wade," she says. "In this light, the late Cardinal Bernardin's 'seamless garment of the consistent ethic of life' or John Paul II's references to the 'culture of death' make even more sense.

"And some people don't believe in the slippery slope."

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