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Nobel Laureates' Letter to President Bush

Eighty Nobel laureates were among those who signed a letter to President Bush urging funding for research on human embryo cells.

To the Honorable George W. Bush, President of the United States

We the undersigned urge you to support Federal funding for research using human pluripotent stem cells. We join with other research institutions and patient groups in our belief that the current National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines, which enable scientists to conduct stem cell research within the rigorous constraints of federal oversight and standards, should be permitted to remain in effect. The discovery of human pluripotent stem cells is a significant milestone in medical research. Federal support for the enormous creativity of the US biomedical community is essential to translate this discovery into novel therapies for a range of serious and currently intractable diseases.

The therapeutic potential of pluripotent stem-cells is remarkably broad. The cells have the unique potential to differentiate into any human cell type. Insulin-producing cells could be used to treat - or perhaps even cure - patients with diabetes, cardiomyocytes could be used to replace damaged heart tissue, chondrocytes could be used for arthritis, and neurons for Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, ALS and spinal cord injuries to name a few examples. There is also the possibility that these cells could be used to create more complex, vital organs, such as kidneys, livers, or even entire hearts.

Some have suggested that adult stem cells may be sufficient to pursue all treatments for human disease. It is premature to conclude that adult stem cells have the same potential as embryonic stem cells -- and that potential will almost certainly vary from disease to disease. Current evidence suggests that adult stem cells have markedly restricted differentiation potential. Therefore, for disorders that prove not to be treatable with adult stem cells, impeding human pluripotent stem cell research risks unnecessary delay for millions of patients who may die or endure needless suffering

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while the effectiveness of adult stem cells is evaluated.

The therapeutic promise of pluripotent stem cells is based on more than two decades of research in mice and other animal models. This research confirms that pluripotent stem cells are capable of generating all of the cell types of the body. Most importantly, the therapeutic potential of these cells has already been demonstrated. Cardiomyocytes generated in the laboratory from these cells have been transplanted into the hearts of dystrophic mice where they formed stable intracardiac grafts. Nerve cells have successfully reversed the progression of the equivalent of multiple sclerosis in mice and have restored function to the limbs of partially paralyzed rats; and insulin-secreting cells have normalized blood glucose in diabetic mice. These findings suggest that therapies using these cells may one day provide important new strategies for the treatment for a host of currently untreatable disorders.

While we recognize the legitimate ethical issues raised by this research, it is important to understand that the cells being used in this research were destined to be discarded in any case. Under these circumstances, it would be tragic to waste this opportunity to pursue the work that could potentially alleviate human suffering. For the past 35 years many of the common human virus vaccines -- such as measles, rubella, hepatitis A, rabies and poliovirus -- have been produced in cells derived from a human fetus to the benefit of tens of millions of Americans. Thus precedent has been established for the use of fetal tissue that would otherwise be discarded.

We urge you to allow research on pluripotent stem cells to continue with Federal support, so that the tremendous scientific and medical benefits of their use may one day become available to the millions of American patients who so desperately need them.

Yours respectfully,

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