# Stem Cell Research - A Necessary Evil? ©

By Connie J. Schlosberg

According to an ABCNEWS/Beliefnet poll, 58 percent of Americans support stem cell research with six in ten saying the federal government should fund such research. With recent political advertisements running this week, the media have stirred up the ongoing debates of stem cell research and cloning. Focusing on this controversial subject of stem cell research, the thesis of my paper is about the ethical issue of human cloning for the sole purpose of harvesting healthy organs. Both supporters and opponents alike have legitimate reasons for their viewpoints. Supporters state human cloning is crucial for technological advances in the medical field for curing diseases, such as stroke, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease, by growing healthy tissues and organs. They further state these embryos are slated for destruction from fertility clinics anyway. Opponents believe that human embryos are being destroyed for experimentation. They also argue that this is the first step towards reproductive cloning (creating an identical copy of an organism) and creation of a potential human being. Are these creatures merely tools for another person's purpose? Should a human life (whether completely formed or not) be used for spare parts for another?

First, let's define stem cells for better understanding of what it is that they do. The National Institute of Health describes stem cells as having the potential to develop into many different cell types within the body. In theory, these cells can divide without limit to replenish other cells as long as the organism is living, acting as a repair system for the body. When a stem cell divides, each new cell has the possibility to either remain a stem cell or become another type of cell with a more specialized function, such as a muscle cell, red blood cell or even a brain cell.

Science News [April 1, 1995, Volume 147, No. 13, Page 197] reports that University of Texas scientists have begun to understand how control genes work by watching what happens when they disable them. They replaced mice stem cells with a nonfunctional gene and then inserted the cells into mice embryos, which bred mice with two copies of the gene. After about ten days of gestation the mice died in their embryo state. These mice had most of the hindbrain but were missing the forebrain and midbrain. These areas are the distinguishing factors between vertebrates from other types of animals.

Several years ago, Cultural Commentator and Harvard Graduate Psychiatrist, Charles Krauthammer wrote "Of (Headless) Mice … and Men" [Time Magazine, January 1998 issue] concerning the laboratory experiments performed at both the University of Texas and University of Bath. Both labs, of course, created headless mice and tadpoles primarily for harvesting organs. This test was completed in over a thousand mice embryos. The mice died instantly since there is no way for them to breathe. Of course, if the theory is that if they can accomplish this feat with mice, they most certainly can for humans. Human bodies developed without any known conscience leaves the question of whether they are alive and truly human. In essence, a cell may be taken from you and used to replicate a mutant being that becomes your personal donor bank.

Charles Krauthammer's essay claims that headless humans will only be deemed for replacement parts and asks should we ignore their humanness simply because they have no faces? Krauthammer sums up his opinion on cloning with "Human beings are ends, not means. There is no grosser corruption of biotechnology than creating a human mutant disemboweling it at our pleasure for spare parts." His fear started when a Chicago physicist announced that he was

putting together a team to create the first human clone. Then it escalated in Frankenstein-like fashion with the laboratory experiments of freakish headless mice and tadpoles. He associates cloning with narcissism and selfishness; pure vanity for the sake of immortality at its finest. Krauthammer's article heightens our concern about morality by asking if these headless mice are not being perceived as living things. The mice live only for a short time since there is no way for them to breathe, proving his point that these clones are alive and don't live for long. He questions what is the point of cloning if the clone can carry the risk of having the same ailments as its originator and not live nearly as long? He further opines if artificial wombs will be created to incubate these infant beings since no sane woman would choose to birth headless babies. Or would they for a fee? Krauthammer questions the legitimacy of cloning and our morality supporting this endeavor; even with organ shortages, the production of headless humans is distasteful. His claim is meant to shock us and make us think. Krauthammer's bottom line is Congress needs to ban human cloning and make it a capital crime. Critics may deem this proposal as harsh and unjustified.

Let's discuss two different philosophical theories – Utilitarianism and Deontology - for resolving this issue. First, if we use John Stuart Mill's utilitarian theory which essentially prescribes that one must always act to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. This ethical theory is a form of consequentialism, which holds the notion that the consequences of a particular action form the basis for any valid moral judgment about that action. Mill, an English philosopher, advocated utilitarianism, a system designed by another philosopher, John Bentham. However, he furthered the theory with the harm principle. The harm principle contends that each individual has the right to act as he wants so long as these

actions don’t harm others. If the action only directly affects the person undertaking the action, then society has no right to intervene even if it feels the person is harming himself. Mill’s theory exonerates those who are "incapable of self-government" from this principle, such as young children. Mill didn’t constitute harm as an action that couldn’t be restricted because it violated the morals of a given society.

Judging from the utilitarian point of view, stem cell research could provide the opportunity to heal those who are ill giving more happiness to both those who are ill and the ones who love and care for them. The end justifies the means in this theory. Since the embryos are discarded fertilized eggs from fertility clinics, utilitarian theorists would sustain using them for the benefit of those who may be healed by them. With the prevalence of so many diseases today, Krauthammer’s headless mice (or humans for that matter) would be a necessary tool to providing the healing power (and happiness) to the majority of people. However, if we bring in Mill’s harm principle, the question arises if the embryo is considered a person who’s a part of society. If so, then the sick person’s action to use stem cells for healing his ailment would be harming (or destroying) someone else for his own benefit. Using Mill’s philosophy and determining the personhood of an embryo, this utilitarian theory would not support stem cell research and cloning.

On the other hand, German philosopher, Immanuel Kant’s deontology philosophy believes that decisions should be made solely by considering one’s duties and the rights of others. An important point with deontological ethics is that how a person accomplishes his goal is more important than what is accomplished. Kant claimed that various actions are morally wrong because of inconsistencies with the status of a person as a free and rational being and acts that

further the status of people as free and rational beings are morally right. Therefore, Kant claimed we have a duty to avoid the first type of act and perform the second type of act. He believed that moral obligation applies to all rational beings. Kant defined the categorical imperative, which signifies an unconditional requirement that applies its rule in all circumstances and is both required and justified as an end. In essence, act only according to that maxim by which it would become a universal law.

Using the deontology perspective and the categorical imperative, the question would be is stem cell research and cloning right or wrong within itself rather than the consequences of performing such an action. In this case, once again with Krauthammer's headless mice, we need to find the maxim. Cloning is the action and healthy organs is the motivation so paired together they make up the maxim. So now, everyone in that same situation (needing healthy organs) would follow that maxim. I cannot determine any situation where a contradiction would arise (so long as everyone involved is in the same situation) which would disqualify this maxim. Therefore, the rules of deontological ethics would say that stem cell research and cloning is morally acceptable for the situation.

After researching the subject and comparing the two theories, I discovered my original perspective has changed. I do believe now that under the circumstances, using the deontological theory, the creation of embryos for organ parts and tissues is within moral obligations. If responsible cloning helps cure each sick person, there is no valid reason not to support this issue, especially if the embryos being used are simply ones that would be discarded anyway. It would be more of a waste (and morally wrong according to Kant's philosophy) to toss away something that could be beneficial to anyone in need of it. Those embryos may have been created for

another reason, but we have a sense of duty to use them for a purpose that can help society cure diseases that kill many of us each year. As long as we are using discarded embryos and as long as there are laws protecting us from irresponsible cloning, I see no reason not to support stem cell research.

In conclusion, I think we still have a long way to go on resolving our differences on stem cells and cloning. There are too many issues associated with this controversy to include here. However, the majority of Americans seem to support the research and funding of such research, which indicates to me that this is not something Congress can ignore. Instead of arguing over whether stem cells are morally right, they should be spending the time creating effective laws that will protect us from scientists with irresponsible intentions. Krauthammer does have a valid point about creating clones simply to keep around as spare parts. I will advocate cloning for those who truly need organs because of disease and sickness, but I can't justify having clones for no reason other than insurance purposes.