Compromise may bring flak from both sides

By Susan Page and Mimi Hall
USA TODAY

For President Bush, all the alternatives on whether to allow federal funding for stem-cell research carried political peril.

Block federal funding? He would dismay those who are desperately seeking cures for ailments that range from Parkinson's disease to juvenile diabetes to spinal cord injuries.

Allow federal funding? He would break a campaign promise and anger an important part of his conservative political base. Some activists against abortion warned that a flip-flop would make him a one-term president.

In the end, Bush sought to offer both sides something. His approach, outlined in his first televised address to the nation since taking office, tried to address the moral objections of abortion opponents by establishing a commission to set ethical guidelines and by barring funding for any new extraction of stem cells from embryos, a process which destroys the embryos. But he said he would allow federal funding for research on existing stem-cell lines that had been harvested from embryos in the past.

That approach carried a risk of its own: leaving neither side satisfied.

The complex political calculations and profound ethical questions involved in the stem-cell debate laced the decision with more anguish and delay than any issue Bush has addressed since moving into the White House.

In the 11-minute speech, his tone was measured and his manner somber. White House aides for weeks had taken pains to portray him as thoughtful, serious and sometimes anguished as he considered the issue.

"He has been deliberate, he has been well-grounded, he has listened to an awful lot of people on both sides of the issue and wrestled with his own heart and own conscience," says Kenneth Duberstein, a chief of staff for President Reagan who urged Bush to allow full funding.

One complication: Bush took a firm position during the campaign opposing funding of research that involves the destruction of embryos. He repeated that view three months ago.

Last week, the American Life League took out a cautionary full-page newspaper ad that likened Bush's promise on stem-cell research to his father's "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge in the 1988 campaign. The elder Bush's decision as president to break that promise undermined his support with some conservatives and contributed to his defeat in 1992.

But whether the younger Bush has now broken his campaign promise is at least debatable, and the initial reaction was mixed. The National Right to Life Committee said the group was "delighted" by his decision, and conservative activist James Dobson said in an interview on CNN, "I think we can live with it."

But the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops called Bush's tradeoff "morally unacceptable."

"We hope and pray that President Bush will return to a principled stand against treating some human lives as nothing more than objects to be manipulated and destroyed for research purposes," said Bishop Joseph Fiorenza, president of the conference.

When Bush visited Pope John Paul II last month, the pope argued that destroying embryos to remove stem cells amounts to ending a life. But Bush also had heard entreaties for funding from Nancy Reagan, who cited hopes of finding a cure for the Alzheimer's disease that has afflicted her husband.

Those who advocate funding had issued their own warnings of dire consequences for Bush. GOP consultant James Lake said that a decision to block funding would "help his opponents ... compound and magnify the perception of him as an extremist."

Their initial reaction also was mixed. They praised Bush for opening the door to some funding but expressed concern that the limitation to existing stem-cell lines wasn't workable or sufficient. Abortion rights activist Kate Michelman called it "a weak and limited compromise."

So the debate over stem-cell research is sure to continue.

"The bottom line: This is probably a decision he should have made a long time ago," says Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a political scientist at the University of Southern California. "By not doing so, by ratcheting up the debate, he's made it all the more risky politically, because more and more people are paying attention."

Defining moment: President Bush agonized over his decision on stem-cell research more than other issues he has addressed.
Today's debate: Stem cell research

Bush's tough choice moves critical research forward

Our view:
But how far is far enough? New rules are just a start.

The easy way to understand President Bush's decision Thursday night to reverse himself and allow the federal funding of embryonic stem cell research is through the eyes of Greg Wasson, a 49-year-old Boston lawyer afflicted by Parkinson's disease.

By allowing federal funding of tightly limited stem cell research, Bush gives Wasson hope that science will be able to find a way to replace the malfunctioning cells that have scrambled his brain chemistry and resulted in muscle tremors so severe that Wasson has been forced to quit work. The assumption, which can now be tested using federal research funds, is that "master" stem cells from human embryos are malleable enough to form any kind of human tissue, including cells to treat Parkinson's, leukemia, diabetes, and other diseases.

Bush, in a televised address, did not go as far as many scientists would like, or as far as eventually will be necessary for effective research and treatment. He limited research to just 60 lines of stem cells from embryos that have already been destroyed. But he nevertheless went far enough to fuel Wasson's hopes and those of millions of others.

It also is a reasonable way, at least for now, to set limits on a fast-moving field in which scientists' abilities have outpaced the public's ethical consensus. Taxpayers' money could not be used for the two most questionable lines of research:

- The creation of embryos for the sole purpose of destroying them. Last month, Virginia scientists announced they were creating embryos from donated sperm and eggs specifically to harvest stem cells.
- The cloning of embryos for stem cell research. Scientists from a Massachusetts firm have announced efforts to produce stem cells through cloned embryos, raising the disturbing specter of human cloning.

Whether — or more likely when — to go further, while still protecting against those extreme uses, will now be a choice for Congress and for a "president's council to monitor stem cell research," which Bush said he plans to create.

That council will recommend guidelines for stem cell research, presumably including whether to broaden research further.

Democrats in Congress, meanwhile, are moving ahead on their own. Even before Bush's address, Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle promised to "schedule legislation sometime this fall to have the debate and the opportunity to fully fund stem cell research."

In each case, it is imperative that political maneuvering be kept to a minimum. The council will have no credibility if its membership is slanted. Nor will Congress have credibility if it descends into its usual partisan squabbling.

In that, Bush set a promising tone Thursday. This was not an easy decision for the president, who previously said he believes life begins at conception.

Politically, the decision both hurts and helps him. Abortion opponents in his own party quickly criticized the decision as "a bitter loss." But the decision also helps Bush's efforts to be seen as a compassionate conservative, more attractive to the political center that he needs to capture if he is to be re-elected.

Regardless, his change of heart should not be seen as a sign of weakness or opportunism, but as a difficult balance between personal beliefs and the national interest.

As a matter of science, it is just a beginning. Researchers have been tinkering with stem cells since the 1960s. Today, even the most optimistic researchers say new treatments are years if not decades away — if they appear at all.

And it is not a complete restraint. Groups operating without federal funds can still create human embryos and even clone them. Two reiterated just this week that they intend to begin implanting cloned human embryos in women who want the children.

But Bush's stem cell decision is a thoughtful first step toward resolving the ethical conundrums posed by the rapid advance of science.

Guard sanctity of life

Opposing view:
Promises of cures do not justify killing of human beings.

By Kenneth L. Connor

The decision to exploit embryonic human beings for medical research, to kill them in order to obtain their stem cells, would open a Pandora's box of chilling possibilities.

Why has so much attention been paid to the fate of such tiny human beings? Because even though embryos are small, the ethical principle involved is huge.

For more than 3,000 years, the first rule of medicine has been "Do no harm." If this principle is abandoned, we will have entered a new era marked by the ethos that the end justifies the means. We will have said that it is permissible to kill some people as long as we intend people to be good for others.

Killing to cure is morally repugnant and must not be established in law. People, no matter their size or stage of life, are not products to be used for the benefit of others, no matter how noble our intentions.

Proponents of killing human embryos to harvest their stem cells promise wondrous miracle cures for a panoply of dreadfully diseases. Even if such inflated promises were true, actual therapies involving embryonic stem cells are decades away. They may never be realized at all.

Meanwhile, promising research involving adult stem cells and those harvested from donated umbilical cords and placental blood is producing current treatments without the unacceptable moral baggage. But even if the promise being held out were true, it still would not justify killing human beings in the embryonic stage of development. If someone assured us that we could cure cancer by killing a dozen children, would that be morally acceptable?

Research in the field of biotechnology cannot proceed in a moral vacuum. The law — inevitably political in nature and slow to react — cannot be our sole guide in these matters. The law follows; it does not lead. Neither does the law rest on transcendent values. Science asks, "Can we?" The law asks, "May we?" Morality asks, "Should we?"

Public frowns on certain research

Recent public opinion polls show public opposition to the federal funding of two types of stem cell research:

- 72% oppose federal funding of cloned human cells.
- 54% oppose federal funding of embryos created for research.

Source: USA TODAY/CNN/USA Today Poll of 1.077 adults.

Morality proceeds from first principles. The first principle that must govern in biotechnology research is the sanctity of human life in all of its stages — from conception to natural death. "Nothing stamped with the divine image," Abraham Lincoln said, "was sent into the world to be trod upon."

Kenneth L. Connor is an attorney and president of the Family Research Council, a Washington, D.C.-based public policy organization.
Stem-cell fight now moves to Capitol Hill

By Kathy Kiely and Jessica Lee
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Now the fight over embryonic stem cells moves to Capitol Hill.

President Bush's split decision on embryonic-stem-cell research left many leaders on both sides in the debate dissatisfied. Some proponents are already vowing to press for a more expansive program than the president is willing to support. Conservative Republicans, while reluctant to break with the president, did not rule out the possibility that they will try to block his proposal.

House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas, said he is "disappointed" Bush is choosing to fund research on stem cells that were obtained by methods that "did not respect the sanctity of human life."

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., echoed those sentiments. He said he fears that the decision to fund research on cells from human embryos breaks a "moral barrier."

On the other side, Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., said, "There will be concern about the limits the president has proposed on this research. ... The Senate will want to take action."

Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash., said the president "walked right up to the line, but then refused to take leadership. It's like stepping on the air hose of somebody who's on oxygen."

Added Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Calif., "The president explained why stem-cell research was so important to American families, and then put a strait jacket around that research."

Rep. Jim Ramstad, R-Minn., expressed concern that limiting research to stem cells that have already been obtained from embryos will hamper research.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, who called the president's decision "honorable," nonetheless expressed the same concerns.

Rep. Jim Langevin, D-R.I., a quadriplegic who parted company with pro-life supporters to back research that might find a cure for his spinal cord injury along with a host of other ailments, predicted that Bush's program would quickly prove inadequate and prompt demands for the president to go further.

But Bush found support from a surprising quarter: "I'm cautiously optimistic," said Sen. Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat who often numbers among the president's most vocal opponents. Harkin said he's inclined to give Bush's plan a chance to work.

Supportive words also came from Sen. Bill Frist, R-Tenn., who had proposed a broader stem-cell research program than Bush was willing to support.

"President Bush's decision means that important stem-cell research will move forward," said Frist, a heart and lung transplant surgeon.

The legislative maneuvering will come on two main fronts:

- **Regulatory:** Legislation has been introduced in both the House and the Senate to permit research on embryonic stem cells, and more is expected. McDermott and Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., have written similar bills that would permit stem-cell research only on embryos that were created for in vitro fertilization but are destined to be discarded.

Another influential offering could come from Frist. Last month, he outlined a series of principles under which research on embryonic stem cells might go forward under tight limitations and strict federal safeguards. Frist has been one of Bush's key congressional allies.

A leading opponent of research on embryonic stem cells, Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., has introduced alternative legislation to create a stem-cell donor bank that does not rely on embryos.

Under Smith's bill, the bank would obtain stem cells from "ethically responsible stem cell sources." The bill limits these to cells obtained from the placenta or umbilical cord after a birth, or from naturally aborted fetuses.

- **Funding:** Each year since 1996, Congress has included a prohibition on federal funding of any research that involves the destruction of human embryos. The prohibition expires Sept. 30, when the government's fiscal year ends.

Supporters of research on embryonic stem cells are likely to try to remove the ban this fall when Congress considers the budget for the Department of Health and Human Services. Opponents are expected to try to retain it.
Bush lets prudence guide research

"Americans know this is not the decision that the science community needs to go forward full force." - Rep. Richard Gephardt

President Bush's stem cell decision, both the substance of it and the manner of his making it, changes American politics profoundly. It is now clearer than ever that America's two parties represent a cultural cleavage much deeper and more dramatic than the traditional, indeed banal party divisions about taxes and spending and the like. The parties represent different sensibilities - different stances toward nature, including human nature. Let it never again be said that contemporary politics is uninteresting.

It is indicative that Mr. Bush, who has been parsimonious of presidential rhetoric, used his first nationally televised address - his first post-inaugural claim on the nation's attention - to discuss (in the words of Leon Kass) "the human future."

Mr. Bush's decision has been characterized, even by his aides, as a "compromise." However, Mr. Kass, the scientist and philosopher who is Mr. Bush's choice to head a commission on biomedical ethics, suggests that "solution" is a more apposite description.

Mr. Bush did not try to split the unsplittable difference about the use, including the production, of embryos - unquestionably living entities, unquestionably of the human species - as resources for research.

Rather, Mr. Bush said cells will be used only "where the life-and-death decision has already been made." This has been widely mischaracterized as a "middle course." Midway between what and what?

Actually, it is strict fidelity to his campaign promise that there would be no federal funding for research "that involves destroying living human embryos."

Mr. Bush's decision is that such destructions are wrong, but that it is acceptable to seek benefits from the 60 or so "lines" of stem cells that have resulted from such wrongs. Is this coherent? It is if you hold, reasonably, that one can materially participate in a wrong by accepting a benefit from it if, but only if, three conditions obtain: One must not cooperate with the wrong, one must not enable the wrong, and one must not provide inducements for the wrong.

Mr. Bush's position is so measured and principled that his critics are in danger of embracing extremism.

This categorical imperative to go "full force," sometimes called the "technological imperative," is often confused with compassion.

Mr. Kass' voice is different: "Because we belong to the nature we study and seek to control, our power over nature eventually means power also over ourselves. We are not only agents but also and increasingly patients of our scientific project for the mastery of nature. Our self-conception, if not also our very being, lies upon the table science - biology, medicine, psychology - has prepared. How shall we treat this patient? What standards of health and human flourishing shall guide our self-manipulations?"

In making his decision about embryonic stem cell research, Mr. Bush, who throughout his public life has been the object of unrelenting condescension from his critics, sought counsel from an array of remarkably learned thinkers, and crafted a solution so rigorous and sophisticated that the condescenders still do not fathom it. And he has leavened the nation's thinking by asking Mr. Kass to organize what are certain to be increasingly complex and momentous debates about biomedical ethics.

At the dawn of the atomic age, Albert Einstein said that the world had more to fear from bad politics than from bad physics. At this dawning of a new age of biomedical possibilities, both enticing and ominous, good politics has prevailed.

That is, the nation's foremost political person has begun the task of defining humane circumscriptions of biological sciences that can be badly used. By opting for prudence - for respect, awe and gratitude for life's mysteriousness - against the "full force" scientific project, Mr. Bush has understood this Kass axiom: "We stand most upright when we gladly bow our heads."

George Will is a syndicated columnist.
The president's action will be seen over the course of time as a historic advance for the pro-life cause.

Nothing in his words was explicit on this point, and that's probably why many commentators missed it in their rush to pick apart the president's decision. He said in his speech that he kept coming to two central questions. "First, are these frozen embryos human life, and therefore something precious to be protected? And second, if they're going to be destroyed anyway, shouldn't they be used for a greater good, for research that has the potential to save and improve other lives?"

He didn't answer either question in so many words, but in his decision his answer was clear. To the first question the answer was yes, life does begin at conception, and so no more embryos must be destroyed (In a campaign interview on Meet the Press in November, 1999, the president did say specifically that he believes life begins at conception). To the second question, the answer was no. Although an excess of stored frozen embryos exists, the fact that they constitute human life eliminates the argument that they should be put to "good use."

Because the president spoke mostly about research on cells drawn from embryos, instead of building a case for the humanity of embryos themselves, even some in the pro-life movement didn't note the historic and radical position of the president, and they turned critical in the days following. They focused on the fact that the president decided to allow federal dollars to research those stem cells already harvested, from embryos already destroyed.

All of us had wished for more at this point. If indeed an embryo is human life, than is not the act of destroying that human life merely to experiment on it akin to the Nazi experiments on concentration camp victims?

Nonetheless, in the days following the president's speech, those who had been arguing for unfettered research on all available embryos were beginning to voice their gloom over the very tiny crack in the door to the research lab left open by the president. Democrats in Congress were gathering steam to burst that door wide open, and the most courteous among them could call what he did only a good first step. They know that the decision was a far stronger pro-life than pro-research position.

In his speech President Bush resonated with nearly all Americans when he said he harbors great hope for cures from stem cell research. But then he added: "I also believe that human life is a sacred gift from our Creator." By his action he left no doubt about where he stands in the most emotional debate of our day, the question of when that life begins.
Washington Post-ABC News Poll

Stem Cell Opinions Differ by Denomination

Lay church members are not always in step with their leaders on the difficult issue of stem cell research, according to a new poll on a variety of national issues conducted by The Washington Post and ABC News. For example, a majority of Catholics interviewed in this poll support such research, in contrast to the Vatican's official position. Evangelical Protestants are sharply divided on the issue.

Q: Sometimes fertility clinics produce extra fertilized eggs, also called embryos, that are not implanted in a woman's womb. These extra embryos either are discarded, or couples can donate them for use in medical research called stem cell research. Some people support stem cell research, saying it's an important way to find treatments for many diseases. Other people oppose stem cell research, saying it's wrong to use any human embryos for research purposes. What about you—do you support or oppose stem cell research?

☐ Support  ☐ Oppose  ☐ No opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All</th>
<th>Evangelical Protestants</th>
<th>Other Protestants</th>
<th>Catholics</th>
<th>No Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63% 33%</td>
<td>46% 48%</td>
<td>74% 22%</td>
<td>63% 34%</td>
<td>80% 16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion 4%</td>
<td>No opinion 6%</td>
<td>No opinion 4%</td>
<td>No opinion 3%</td>
<td>No opinion 4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q: The federal government provides funding to support a variety of medical research. Do you think federal funding for medical research should or should not include funding for stem cell research?

☐ Should  ☐ Should not  ☐ No opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All</th>
<th>Evangelical Protestants</th>
<th>Other Protestants</th>
<th>Catholics</th>
<th>No Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60% 36%</td>
<td>47% 49%</td>
<td>70% 28%</td>
<td>57% 40%</td>
<td>72% 24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion 4%</td>
<td>No opinion 4%</td>
<td>No opinion 2%</td>
<td>No opinion 3%</td>
<td>No opinion 4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This Washington Post-ABC News poll is based on telephone interviews with 1,352 randomly selected adults nationwide, conducted July 26-30. "Evangelical Protestants" refers to self-identified Protestants who said they considered themselves "a born-again or evangelical Christian." The margin of error for overall results is plus or minus 3 percentage points. Sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll. Interviewing was conducted by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.