

Bishops reject embryonic stem-cell bill

WASHINGTON (CNS) – The U.S. bishops have urged the House of Representatives to reject an embryonic stem-cell bill that would fund research that involves the destruction of human embryos.

Instead, they said, Congress should support research that would use available stem cells from adult tissues, cord blood, amniotic fluid and placentas.

In a letter dated Jan. 9 and released Jan. 10, Philadelphia Cardinal Justin Rigali, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, urged House members to "consider the fundamental moral line" they would cross if they approved legislation on embryonic stem-cell research scheduled for a vote Jan. 11.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., has included embryonic stem-cell research among the priorities for the first 100 hours of business in the 110th Congress. President George W. Bush vetoed a similar measure in July, and the 109th Congress failed to override the veto.

H.R. 3, the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2007, would lift Bush's restrictions and expand federal funding for embryonic-stem cell research.

Cardinal Rigali called it a "sad reality" that other forms of stem-cell research have received inadequate funding and attention while there has been "an exaggerated and almost exclusive focus on destructive embryo research in the political and policymaking arena."

"Even the national cord-blood stem-cell bank that Congress approved a year ago, which could benefit many thousands of Americans immediately, has received minimal funding," he said.

Other forms of stem-cell research made news Jan. 7 based on a report from scientists at Wake Forest and Harvard universities that said the amniotic fluid surrounding a child in the womb can be the source of medically useful stem cells.

The report was published in an online edition of the journal Nature Biotechnology.

In his letter, Cardinal Rigali said the lawmakers should support “better solutions” than the “most speculative and most divisive type of stem-cell research,” that which involves the destruction of embryos.

“On a practical level, embryonic stem-cell research has been as disappointing in its results as it has been divisive to our society,” he said. “After almost three decades of research in mouse embryonic stem cells and nine years in the human variety, researchers can scarcely point to a safe and effective ‘cure’ for any condition in mice let alone human beings” using embryonic stem cells.

“At the same time,” he continued, “ethically sound research using nonembryonic stem cells has continued to advance, helping patients with over 70 conditions in early peer-reviewed studies.”

“Since Congress debated this issue last summer, further evidence has emerged on the versatility of adult stem cells, and on the likelihood that they can be reprogrammed to enhance this quality,” he said.

Cardinal Rigali told House members also to consider “the fundamental moral line” they will cross if they approve the measure.

“The federal government has never taken the crass utilitarian approach of forcing taxpayers to support the direct killing of innocent human life, at any stage of development, in the name of progress,” he added.