

Cardinal Urges Senate to Support Cord Blood Stem Cell Research, Reject Bill Requiring Embryo Destruction

WASHINGTON (July 12, 2005)— Cardinal William H. Keeler has urged the U.S. Senate to support legislation fostering umbilical cord blood stem cell research and treatments.

At the same time, the Cardinal urged the Senate to reject a bill which would use federal funds to encourage researchers to destroy new human embryos from fertility clinics for stem cell research.

In separate letters (July 11, 2005), Cardinal Keeler supported the “Stem Cell Therapeutic and Research Act of 2005” (S. 1317), sponsored by Senator Orrin Hatch, while urging rejection of the “Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005” (H.R. 810/S. 471), sponsored by Senators Arlen Specter and Tom Harkin. He termed the latter a “destructive and morally offensive” proposal.

The House version of Senator Hatch’s bill (H.R. 2520), introduced by Rep. Chris Smith, was approved 431 to 1 on May 24.

The two bills may be considered on the Senate floor as early as this week.

In his letter on the “Stem Cell Therapeutic and Research Act of 2005,” Cardinal Keeler noted that embryonic stem cell research raises grave moral objections because it requires the destruction of human life, and its possible use in future treatments remains a speculation. “By contrast, this bill relates to an area of stem cell research and treatment that is indisputably acceptable on moral grounds and remarkably promising in terms of clinical benefits: the use of umbilical cord blood retrieved immediately after live births.”

Cardinal Keeler is Chairman of the Committee for Pro-Life Activities, United States

Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

“Umbilical cord blood stem cells have successfully treated thousands of patients with dozens of diseases,” the Cardinal said. “They also exhibit properties once associated chiefly with embryonic stem cells: They grow rapidly in culture, producing enough cells to be clinically useful in both children and adults; they can treat patients who are not an exact genetic match, without being rejected as foreign tissue; and they seem able to produce a wide array of different cell types.”

“What is preventing far broader use of umbilical cord blood stem cells is not an ethical concern, or any lack of evidence of clinical benefits, but simply a lack of funding and access,” Cardinal Keeler continued. “By helping to establish a nationwide public cord blood bank, this legislation will begin saving more lives almost immediately. By contrast, scientists are now warning against ‘false expectations’ regarding embryonic stem cells, pointing out that clinical use of those cells might be ‘three to five decades’ away (‘Scientist: Stem Cell Work Will Aid Humans,’ AP, May 22, 2005).

Cardinal Keeler said H.R. 810/S. 471 would rescind the Bush Administration’s policy of funding only research on embryonic stem cell (ESC) lines already in existence. Saying this bill would encourage large-scale destruction of innocent human life for research purposes, the Cardinal said: “I urge you in the strongest possible terms to oppose all destructive and morally offensive proposals of this kind.”

“Government has no business forcing taxpayers to become complicit in the direct destruction of human life at any stage,” Cardinal Keeler said. “Nor is there any point in denying the scientific fact that human life is exactly what is at stake here.”

The Cardinal noted that since 1995 Congress has passed—and Presidents of both major parties have signed—annual riders insisting that early human embryos be protected from risk of harm or death in federally funded research projects. “H.R. 810 radically departs from this precedent by encouraging researchers to kill human embryos, or pay others to kill them, to become eligible for federal stem cell research grants,” he wrote.

“It would be bad enough to promote such destruction of life if it had been found

necessary to save patients with devastating diseases,” Cardinal Keeler said. “In such a case it would be important to remember that the end, however worthwhile in itself, does not justify an evil means. But in fact, the practical argument for funding ESC research fails even on its own amoral terms. For adult stem cell and other avenues posing no moral problem have advanced quickly toward human clinical trials to treat juvenile diabetes, corneal damage, Parkinson’s disease, spinal cord injury, sickle-cell anemia, cardiac damage and many other conditions.”

“At this point in medical science,” Cardinal Keeler continued, “the question is not whether alternative ways are available to pursue the therapeutic goals served by ESCs—rather, it is whether ESCs will ever catch up with the therapeutic benefits now arising from the alternatives.”

“If there is to be any change in the existing policy,” Cardinal Keeler said, “it should be to end this limited funding of ESC research altogether, so that taxpayers’ resources can more effectively be marshaled for research now showing itself to be more ethically and medically sound.”