Catholic values at stake in world stem cell summit in Baltimore

When scientists meet in Baltimore for the second World Stem Cell Summit, among issues they will discuss are ethical questions involved in stem cell research.

High on that list for many is the destruction of human embryos for medical research, a practice the Catholic Church views as the immoral killing of an innocent human being.

The summit is slated to take place Sept. 21-23, at the Baltimore Convention Center.

Among highlights of interest to Catholics in general, and to those in the Archdiocese of Baltimore in particular, are:

– A keynote speech Sept. 21 by Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley on the state's involvement in stem cell research.

– A general session that same day on stem-cell research, ethics and society.

– A science session later that afternoon on the relative scientific merits of research based on human embryonic stem cells versus induced pluripotent stem cells. The latter are human cells derived not from embryos but from adult stem cells, which have been induced to act like embryonic cells – capable of developing into all forms of human tissue.

Catholic officials and many ethicists have hailed the two-year-old breakthrough in creating induced pluripotent human stem cells as a discovery that should bring an end to the practice of destroying human embryos to create stem-cell lines for medical research.

Nancy E. Paltell, the Maryland Catholic Conference's associate director of respect for life, told The Catholic Review that in the three years since Maryland started funding stem cell research with taxpayer dollars, well over half of the $56 million that was spent went into research on human embryonic stem cells.

Of the $12.4 million in funding in the current fiscal year, roughly half involves research using human embryos, she said.

Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland are the recipients of nearly all the state funding for stem-cell research, with each receiving about half of it, she said.

Marylanders can see where their money is going Sept. 21 because, in conjunction with the world summit, the Maryland Stem Cell Research Commission will host its second annual Maryland Stem Cell Symposium that morning.

The 8 a.m. to noon symposium at the Convention Center is to feature exhibits and presentations from more than 80 Maryland scientists receiving state funding for stem-cell research. The symposium is free and open to the public, but the summit is open only to registrants.

In a phone interview, Paltell noted that the church supports stem-cell research for therapeutic purposes, but only within a moral framework – a framework that excludes "the ethical quagmire of embryonic stem cells."

She criticized the use of public funds for research using human embryos not only on moral grounds, but on grounds of science and efficacy.

More and more people are receiving treatment for many different diseases or disabilities, from Parkinson's disease to blindness, as a result of stem-cell research breakthroughs, she said – but all those breakthroughs have come in research using adult stem cells, not embryonic stem cells.

The MCC and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops point out in information on their Web sites that to date not a single medical cure or treatment has been developed as a result of research on human embryonic cells, despite the billions of dollars devoted to that research.

Maryland legislators, in passing the stem-cell research law in 2006, "said that they wanted to fund 'translation' research, which is research that is actually closest to helping patients … from the lab to the bedside," Paltell said.

However, she added, “with very, very few exceptions, the money has been going to basic research that is decades away from helping to treat patients.”

Part of the rationale behind Maryland’s funding of stem cell research was to bring biotechnology companies and the accompanying jobs into the state, Paltell said. She said those companies, rather than academic institutions, are the ones who tend to be in the forefront of translation research, yet almost no public stem-cell research funding in Maryland is going to such companies.