

# **FDA approval of embryonic stem-cell research a ‘step back’**

Maryland could become a focal point in the moral minefield of embryonic stem-cell research.

As the state considers laying off employees and freezing programs in reaction to a budget deficit, Gov. Martin J. O’Malley has increased funding for stem-cell research by \$400,000, which was included in the proposed state budget that was released Jan. 20.

Three days later, a California company announced that it had received approval from the Food and Drug Administration to inject embryonic stem cells into humans for the first time.

“It’s a step back,” Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien told The Catholic Review.

“Any time our country stands for killing the unborn and manufacturing life to destroy it is a pretty sad commentary.”

According to The Baltimore Sun, several medical institutions in the Archdiocese of Baltimore could be contracted by Geron Corp. to conduct Phase I research, which measures safety rather than potential benefit, on patients suffering from spinal cord injuries using the injection of embryonic stem cells.

“My first reaction,” said Nancy Paltell, the Maryland Catholic Conference’s associate director for respect for life, “was ‘So what?’ So many groups are already treating patients, using adult stem cells.”

The Catholic Church does not oppose adult stem-cell research in the field of regenerative medicine, but objects strongly to embryonic stem-cell research, which destroys living human embryos.

According to *Dignitas Personae* (The Dignity of a Person), a Vatican document released Dec. 12, “The obtaining of stem cells from a living human embryo ... invariably causes the death of the embryo and is consequently gravely illicit.”

Beyond being morally objectionable, embryonic stem-cell research is bad science, according to Ms. Paltell and Richard M. Doerflinger, the associate director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops<sup>1</sup> Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities.

“If we have very limited resources in a time of economic hardship,” Mr. Doerflinger said when asked about the Maryland budget, “we want to fund only research that has direct relevance to helping patients. For the foreseeable future, that will be adult stem-cell research.

“This is no time to be increasing funding for the most speculative and most morally problematic research in the medical field.”

The 2008 report of Maryland TEDCO and the Maryland Stem Cell Commission cited the problems associated with embryonic stem-cell research.

The summary of a \$1.725 million grant to the University of Maryland, Baltimore, to study “Genomic and Epigenetic Instability of Human Stem Cells Used In Regenerative Medicine” began:

“One of the biggest potential problems for the use of embryonic stem cells to treat, via transplant delivery, human chronic severe diseases, such as traumatic neurological situations, degenerative nerve diseases, cancer, etc, is that all experimental evidence shows they have a potential to generate tumors over time.”

According to the Wall Street Journal, conversely, in late 2007 researchers in the U.S. and Japan created human embryonic stem cells without destroying any embryos. Those findings led to the hope that a patient's cells might one day be converted into tissue, which would not be rejected.

Maryland has budgeted \$18.4 million for stem-cell research in fiscal year 2010. A breakdown of how much was for embryonic stem-cell research was unavailable. Ms. Paltell will work to convince Maryland legislators to eliminate that funding or designate it solely for adult stem-cell research.

"Why is this pet program receiving special treatment at a time when everything else is being cut?" Ms. Paltell said. "Why put millions of dollars into embryonic stem-cell research that isn't going anywhere?"

Gov. O'Malley hosted the First Maryland Stem Cell Research Symposium last December. Next September, Maryland will host the World Stem Cell Summit at the Baltimore Convention Center.

Archbishop O'Brien will hear more about the issue Feb. 2-4, at the National Catholic Bioethics Center's 22nd workshop for bishops in Dallas.

"We're going to let our voices be heard," he said. "There are others, and we hope to gain some momentum with these politicians and let them know that their vote is not the only morality."

Mr. Doerflinger was suspicious of the timing of the Geron Corp. announcement, which came three days after the inauguration of President Barack Obama, who has backed legislation that would create federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research.

"The one phrase I wrote down from the president's inaugural address," Mr.

Doerflinger said, “was ‘We’re going to restore science to its rightful role, its rightful place in making policy.’ I hope he does that, because if you follow that, you’ll end up where the Catholic Church has been all these years.”

*George Matysek, Matt Palmer and The Catholic News Service contributed to this article.*