NIH plan for embryonic stem cells called objectionable, obsolete

WASHINGTON – The National Institutes of Health's draft guidelines for embryonic stem-cell research support "a course of action that is both morally objectionable and, increasingly, scientifically obsolete," the general secretary of the U.S. bishops' conference said in comments to NIH.

Monsignor David J. Malloy submitted the 11-page comments on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops May 22, four days before the end of a 30-day period of public comment on the proposed guidelines.

Calling the draft guidelines "more permissive than any policy approved in the past by any branch of the federal government," Monsignor Malloy said NIH "is missing an enormous opportunity to show how sound science and responsible ethics can not only coexist but support and enrich each other."

The draft guidelines – drawn up at the request of President Barack Obama after his March 9 executive order overturned President George W. Bush's ban on federal funding of research involving the destruction of human embryos – would allow the use of federal funds for embryonic stem-cell research only on embryos created for reproductive purposes at in vitro fertilization clinics and no longer needed for that purpose.

They specifically ban funding "for research using embryonic stem cells derived from other sources, including somatic cell nuclear transfer, parthenogenesis and/or IVF embryos created for research purposes."

Also prohibited is funding of research in which stem cells "are introduced into nonhuman primate blastocysts" or research "involving the breeding of animals where the introduction of human embryonic stem cells or human-induced pluripotent stem cells may have contributed to the germ line."

Monsignor Malloy said NIH "has prematurely dismissed as being of secondary interest and limited benefit" the advances being made in stem-cell research

involving adult and cord-blood stem cells, as well as induced pluripotent cells – which do not require the destruction of human embryos.

He said those advances have prompted leading stem-cell researchers "to declare that this is 'the beginning of the end' of embryonic stem-cell research and its attendant moral controversy."

"Here is a new common ground for Americans of many different moral views, a path to cure we can all live with," Monsignor Malloy said. "Yet this administration seems to be stuck in the ideological battles of the past, as if embryonic stem-cell research must receive priority attention and funding precisely because so many Americans have raised moral objections."

In addition to his general comments that "the guidelines overall are morally unacceptable, medically unnecessary and legally flawed," Monsignor Malloy also cited problems with some specific aspects of the informed consent provisions of the draft guidelines.

For example, he said, there are "no actual safeguards" to prevent researchers from seeking to influence parents' decisions, prior to the creation of embryos for fertilization attempts, about whether they would later donate any "spare" embryos for research purposes.

"Nothing in the guidelines prevents fertility clinics from deliberately overproducing embryos (ostensibly for reproduction) for parents choosing that option, to ensure that a number of embryos will later be available for federally funded research," the USCCB official said. "In practice, then, the guidelines could invite exactly the abuse they claim to prohibit."

The full text of Monsignor Malloy's comments is available online at www.usccb.org/prolife/NIHcomments.pdf. Public comment on the proposed guidelines may be submitted on the USCCB Web site at www.usccb.org/stemcellcampaign.