

NIH rejects comments opposing funding of embryonic stem-cell research

WASHINGTON - Although 30,000 of the approximately 49,000 comments on the National Institutes of Health's draft guidelines on human embryonic stem-cell research opposed any federal funding of such research, those responses were "deemed not responsive to the question put forth," according to the acting director of NIH.

"We did not ask them whether to fund such funding, but how it should be funded," said Dr. Raynard S. Kington in a telephone briefing with the media July 6.

But Richard M. Doerflinger, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, said it was "disingenuous (for Kington) to say that comments criticizing the guidelines overall were to be ignored."

The 30,000 individuals or organizations that made comments in opposition to federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research were saying, "You're not responding to what the American people want. Start over," Doerflinger added.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and its affiliated organization, the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment, directed 9,436 comments to NIH about the draft guidelines before the May 26 close of the public comment period, according to Deirdre A. McQuade, assistant director for policy and communications in the pro-life secretariat.

NIH's final guidelines, which take effect July 7, are not significantly different from the draft guidelines published April 23 and open for public comment until May 26.

The draft guidelines allowed 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 set standards for voluntary informed consent by those donating the embryos, and said no NIH funds would be

given for research that did not meet the standards.

The final guidelines, however, set up an “alternative pathway” for approval of funding of research involving embryos donated before the new guidelines took effect. A working group made up of about 10 scientists and ethicists will look at each such application on a case-by-case basis, Kington said, to determine whether it meets “the core principles of voluntary informed consent.”

Like the draft, the final guidelines 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.”