

A Scientific Advance, a Political Question Mark

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The discovery that it is possible to create equivalents to embryonic stem cells without destroying embryos has the potential to reshape -- and perhaps defuse -- the acrimonious political debate that has raged ever since human embryonic stem cells were discovered in 1998.

Even before the research was officially published yesterday, [White House](#) officials began making the case that the studies vindicated the president's unwavering six-year opposition to funding for embryo-cell research and his long-standing position that scientific progress is possible without offending the morality of millions of Americans.

"The science has overtaken the politics," Karl Zinsmeister, the chief domestic policy adviser to [President Bush](#), said in an interview yesterday. "If you set reasonable parameters and offer a lot of encouragement and public funding, science will solve this dilemma, and you don't have to have a culture war about this."

Others involved in the stem cell debate cautioned that much work remains to be done to prove the value of the new cells. No one yet knows, for example, whether the new cells will be as effective as conventional embryonic stem cells may prove to be against certain diseases, or whether the new cells will even prove safe for use in people.

For those reasons, several said, it would be wrong to halt efforts to loosen the president's controversial restrictions on federal funding for stem cell research, which prevent federal dollars from going to research on cells from embryos destroyed after Aug. 9, 2001.

"I don't think this changes the debate," said [Rep. Diana DeGette](#) (D-Colo.), a key participant in the House debate. "We still need to encourage all types of research, and we need to put ethical oversight in place."

"While this is exciting basic research, it could still take years to get this to work in humans in a way that could be used clinically," said [Robert Lanza](#), chief scientific officer of Advanced Cell Technology in [Worcester](#), Mass. "I cannot overstate that this is early-stage research and that we should not abandon other areas of stem cell research."

Still, even skeptics of the president's approach acknowledged that the new findings could make it more difficult to keep up the political momentum for embryo research, even if scientists say it is too early to abandon it. Most immediately, some said, it could hurt the effort to override Bush's June veto of a bill that would have loosened the rules on federal funding.

Although the House is far short of the votes needed for an override, the Senate has for some time been within one vote of accomplishing it, and Democratic leaders had hoped to make that symbolic gesture as an election-year slap against the Bush administration. With an alternative to embryonic cells now possibly available, the likelihood of finding a 67th vote may be lower, advocates acknowledged.

President Bush has been signaling for some time his hope that science may help find a way out of the ethical issues surrounding the enormously versatile cells that scientists say can be used to treat diseases such as

Parkinson's or diabetes. His aides said the new reports represent precisely the kind of research the president has in mind, and they noted that one of the studies received federal funding from the [National Institutes of Health](#).

Zinsmeister said he hopes congressional critics of the president's policy will now pull back. "We are hopeful that people will now let go of this," he said.

But that seemed unlikely yesterday. [Sen. Edward M. Kennedy](#) (D-Mass.) hailed the new reports as "extraordinary scientific breakthroughs" but said embryonic stem cell research must continue. "Instead of aiding that fight, the Bush administration is hampering it through needless restrictions on stem cell research and by denying NIH the funds it needs to capitalize on new advances," he said.

One of the researchers involved in yesterday's reports said the Bush restrictions may have slowed discovery of the new method, since scientists first had to study embryonic cells to find out how to accomplish the same thing without embryos.

"My feeling is that the political controversy set the field back four or five years," said [James Thomson](#), who led a team at the [University of Wisconsin](#) and who discovered human embryonic stem cells in 1998.

But other experts close to the administration applauded the president's approach as the right way for science to evolve in an atmosphere of public controversy. The new method is "a model of ethical scientific research for a morally pluralistic society," said Carter Snead, former general counsel for the President's Council on Bioethics, now on the faculty at the [University of Notre Dame Law School](#).