

October 20, 2015

As leading academic medical centers and scientific societies whose medical scientists conduct life-saving research, we have grave concerns about legislative proposals to restrict the use of fetal tissue for research.

From therapies for end-stage breast cancer, diabetes, and Parkinson's disease to a promising vaccine for Ebola, vital medical research depends on continued use of fetal tissue under current laws and regulations. Fetal tissue continues to be an important resource for biomedical research. Fetal tissue is used when scientists need a cellular system that is less differentiated than adult cells. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "fetal tissue continues to be a critical resource for important efforts such as research on degenerative eye disease, human development disorders such as Down syndrome, and infectious diseases, among a host of other diseases." Since the 1930's, fetal tissue has been used in a broad range of research that has led to lifesaving discoveries. In the past, human fetal tissue research has been critical in establishing permanent cell lines for use in vaccine research for diseases such as polio, hepatitis A, measles, mumps, rubella, chickenpox, and rabies. These established cell lines are currently being used to develop an Ebola vaccine.

Legislative proposals that halt research from cells already developed from fetal tissue and/or restrict scientists' access to new tissue or cell lines would have serious downstream consequences:

- They would limit new research on vaccines not yet developed, for treatments not yet discovered, for causes of diseases not yet understood.
- Some research questions cannot be answered using previous cell lines that have been immortalized; such proposals would prevent research that requires tissue that has been obtained more recently.
- Such proposals would restrict research only to organs or tissues for which cell lines currently exist, preventing new avenues of research exploring differences between tissue types.
- Such proposals would restrict access to new tissue necessary for the development and validation of novel research tools and technologies – essential to cutting-edge research.
- Organs and tissues are not just composed of a single type of cell, but rather an environment of multiple cell types; proposed restrictions would prevent scientists from studying the behavior of cells as they exist in our bodies.

As a prominent bioethicist has observed, the legal and ethical rules enforced for fetal tissue donation are similar in many respects to the ethics of organ donation. The ability to donate fetal tissue for medical research is not linked to an increase in the number of abortions practiced. Nor can we reasonably expect a limitation on fetal tissue donation or research to reduce the number of abortions. Rather, it will prevent the use of tissue that would otherwise be destroyed, hindering efforts to better understand, diagnose, and treat diseases.

We understand and share some of the concerns that have been raised in response to recent headlines, and our institutions endorse strong ethical practices that will address these concerns without shutting down vital research. We oppose any efforts to profit from the sale or distribution of human fetal tissue. Additionally, we embrace the best ethical practices that separate the decision to have an abortion from the decision to donate tissue for research.

As physicians and scientists, we work every day to save and improve lives. We urge lawmakers to support our ability to continue this important work by rejecting any proposals that restrict access to fetal tissue for research that has the potential to save countless lives.

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Association of Medical School Microbiology and Immunology Chairs
Association of University Radiologists
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Boston Children's Hospital
Boston University School of Medicine
California Northstate University College of Medicine
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