

Editorial: Continue the research

A breakthrough by UW and Japanese scientists may resolve nagging moral issues about destroying human embryos.

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We have long been strong supporters of embryonic stem cell research, despite the controversy that swirls around it and the presidential veto over federal funding that stunted it.

But we share the excitement about a new breakthrough in this field, one that may hold the tantalizing possibility that embryonic stem cell research will be a thing of the past. What makes it particularly satisfying is that scientists from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who first isolated human embryonic stem cells nearly 10 years ago, including James Thomson, are prominently involved in this development as well.

According to an article by the Journal Sentinel's John Fauber (www.jsonline.com/688321), a team of UW researchers and a separate group of Japanese scientists have, independent of one another, been able to reprogram genes in human skin cells to act like embryonic stem cells.

If these new cells have all the benefits of embryonic stem cells - the ability to grow into any cell and organ - without hidden hazards, the research could pave the way for therapies that could overcome the moral and religious objections associated with destroying embryos or therapeutic cloning. The objections have been raised repeatedly to attack embryonic stem cell research. President Bush seized on those objections in his 2001 decision to limit federal funding for such research, a position he, unfortunately, still maintains.

While we respect the belief of those who argue that destroying an embryo is wrong because it takes a human life, many embryos already are discarded by fertility clinics. What's more, we ardently believe that the potential of such research to cure illness is profoundly humanitarian and thus equally respectful of life. Adult stem cell research has produced some dividends, but many scientists think the greater potential is in embryonic cells.

This breakthrough could make that passé. But Thomson and other scientists involved point out that more research is needed to resolve, among other things, patient safety concerns.

In the meantime, it's important that scientists not turn their back yet on embryonic stem cell research and risk losing all of their work.

