

The Fetal-Tissue Research Controversy

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Five of six Lincoln residents interviewed Wednesday said they would oppose state legislation banning fetal-tissue research at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

All five who supported fetal-tissue research said they were either pro-life or had "mixed feelings" about abortion, but only one expressed moral qualms about the research. Instead, supporters said, fetal-tissue research has the potential to improve and save human lives. Banning it while abortion is legal and the tissue is available would be a wasted opportunity to learn more about many diseases, they said, since many think fetal-tissue research is the best hope for finding cures for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes, leukemia, and sickle cell anemia.

Two respondents also said the Legislature should respect and protect freedom of research.

"Not doing the research would be insane," said Amber Fry, 23, a Democrat and UNL graduate student. "We're setting ourselves up for trouble if we don't respect freedom of research."

Each respondent was asked to explain why he or she would support or oppose LB462, a bill that would ban using fetal tissue for medical research of any kind at UNMC or any other state institution. State Sen. Dwite Pedersen of Elkhorn proposed LB462 to force the university to find alternatives to using fetal tissue for research. A similar bill failed to pass last year.

Fetal-tissue research has been a topic of increasingly heated debate since 1993, when former President Clinton removed a ban on federally funded fetal-tissue research. It became known in November 1999 that UNMC researchers were using brain cells from aborted fetuses to study Alzheimer's and other progressive brain disorders and had been doing so since 1995. Many state senators and members of the NU Board of Regents said they were unaware of the research. Since then, research supporters and opponents have grappled for control of the tissue.

Meanwhile, most opponents say the research is immoral. Promising research does not justify abortion, they say. Most supporters, however, say aborting the research, not fetuses, would be the real crime.

Charlene Maxey-Harris, a 39-year-old librarian and Lamaze instructor, said she opposed the research because other alternatives exist. She said researchers could use blood from umbilical cords and tissue from miscarried babies.

"Saving the blood is a practice that hasn't caught on yet," said Maxey-Harris, a Democrat. "Not many hospitals do it, certainly none in Lincoln. It's hard to keep the stem cells alive."

The blood of newborn babies, found in umbilical cords after birth, contains a large number of blood stem cells. Stem cells produce specialized cells that in turn become tissue, blood or organs. Researchers hope to someday use stem cells, also found to a lesser extent in adults, to replace heart muscle cells in those who have suffered heart attacks or to replenish insulin-producing beta cells in diabetics.

But the research done at UNMC involved neurons which scientists have only been able to obtain from fetal tissue, and the rest of the respondents said any research was good research, regardless of the tissue source.

"It's a way to extend a life, not terminate one," said Nell Johnson, 73, a retired teacher and Democrat. "It's like giving your organs to somebody."

Tsegaye Tadesse, a 39-year-old agriculture consultant from Ethiopia, agreed.

"As a Christian, I don't believe in killing any human," he said. "But I have a wife, and if she was sick, I would want her more than a child," he said. "The grown-ups should be saved."

Tadesse said he did not feel completely comfortable with researchers using fetal tissue, but that the potential outcomes of the research outweigh any objection he has to their work.

Like Tadesse, Shaima Nassir opposes abortion for religious reasons but supports fetal-tissue research. Nassir, 21, is a Muslim from Iraq, where abortion is considered murder and "there are no babies without marriage." But Nassir, who works at Lincoln Social Services, said that if abortions were going to take place, something good should come out of a bad situation.

"If it saves people's lives, what's wrong with it?" she asked.

Maxey-Harris, who is Christian, thinks she has the answer. "It's a cruel way of doing it," she said. "There are other ways."

Maybe, maybe not, said Brad Trenkle, a 21-year-old UNL computer science major and a centrist Democrat. That's not what's most important, he said. Trenkle opposes a ban on fetal-tissue research because he said scientists should be able to research what they want, how they want.

"Research at the university level should have a fair amount of academic freedom," said Trenkle, a Methodist. "The Legislature doesn't fully understand academic freedom."

Neither Trenkle nor Fry, who also said researchers should be able to study without restriction, felt a medical breakthrough was needed to justify researchers' freedom.

"Research continues for years and years with no breakthroughs. It's just a better understanding that's important," Trenkle said.

Fry said it is always too early to stop research.

"What if they had stopped building the airplane when it wasn't working? There's always a chance for a breakthrough, but you have to keep researching," Fry added.

Retired teacher Johnson said scientific progress was not the only benefit of fetal-tissue research. Although having "mixed feelings" about abortion, Johnson, also a Methodist, said there were other considerations as well.

"There are a lot of children born who never should be," she said. "Some of them need taken care of, but a lot of them don't get that. And unless you can help by giving a child a home, then you don't have any room to speak."

Tadesse agreed.

"It's tough. Both sides have their arguments," he said. "But the outcome is most important. The research should continue."