

Stem-Cell Plaintiffs Cite Ethical Motivation

Scientists Behind Suit Say Work Using Material Derived From Embryos Is Morally Objectionable, Unlikely to Yield Cures

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WASHINGTON—The two scientists behind the lawsuit that has temporarily blocked federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research said Wednesday they were motivated by ethical objections to destroying human embryos for medical research.



Stephen Voss for The Wall Street Journal

Drs. James L. Sherley and Theresa Deisher near the U.S. Capitol in Washington on Wednesday.

The scientists, James Sherley of Boston and Theresa Deisher of Seattle, had never met until this week, when they flew to Washington to confer with House and Senate aides and lobby against research using embryonic stem cells. They were recruited separately by lawyers looking to challenge the federal policy.

"We have a responsibility and are taught to do ethical research," said Dr. Sherley in an interview with The Wall Street Journal. "This is impacting the quality of science in this country."

Embryonic stem-cell research is seen as promising by many scientists to treat a range of diseases because the cells can develop into any type of tissue. But to get the cells, the embryo must be destroyed, which some see as akin to taking a human life. The embryos used are typically left over from fertility treatments.

A federal judge last week ruled the research violated federal law. The decision rocked the scientific community while bolstering social conservatives, who have long argued the experiments are immoral.

The Obama administration is appealing the judge's order, and said this week it would require the government to stop funding all embryonic stem-cell research, including that allowed under more-restrictive rules set by the Bush administration.

The scientists bring similar points of view to the issue. Dr. Deisher is Catholic and wears a small gold cross, while Dr. Sherley is Baptist, but both say their views on the matter are driven by ethics, not religion.

Both have been in the news before. Dr. Sherley, 52 years old, staged a 12-day hunger strike in 2007 after the Massachusetts Institute of Technology denied him tenure. Dr. Sherley, who is black, blamed racism for the rejection, a charge the school denied.

Dr. Deisher, 47, has spoken at antiabortion events and gained attention when she accused a former employer of fraud, a charge that led to a Securities and Exchange Commission investigation.

She said she was transformed from a "radical feminist" after she saw the negative impact abortion had on some of her friends.

Both said embryonic stem-cell research is morally objectionable and unlikely to produce promised treatments or cures. They said research using adult stem cells, the field each of them works in, has more potential to help patients.

The public has "been sold this hype and this promise that embryonic stem cells are going to cure everyone and we're all going to get up and dance," Dr. Deisher said. But she said researchers involved always wind up renegeing on their promises.

Those on the other side say it is up to scientific panels convened by the National Institutes of Health to decide what is most promising.

"These guys are using a court process in what should be a scientific process," said Curt I. Civin, director of the University of Maryland's stem-cell biology center.

Their case relies on their contention that they are disadvantaged in their effort to get federal research dollars because of illegal competition from embryonic stem-cell researchers. In its legal filing, the Obama administration noted that Dr. Deisher had never even applied for government research funding.

She said that doesn't matter.

"Any adult stem cell scientist is disadvantaged, and that's because there is a deliberate focus to fund embryonic stem cell research and a focus away from adult stem cell research," Dr. Deisher said.

An appeals court has already said the two scientists were entitled to sue.

The scientists and their lawyer, Samuel Casey, said they were surprised by the sweeping impact of federal Judge Royce Lamberth's decision. Mr. Casey said he hadn't asked the court to address Bush-era rules or anticipated a ruling that would halt research funded under those rules.

Though the appeals process has just begun, Drs. Sherley and Deisher started canvassing Capitol Hill this week, anticipating the matter ultimately may be decided by Congress. They said they spent Wednesday meeting with Senate and House aides to make the case against the research.

Some lawmakers have talked of passing new legislation to nullify Judge Lamberth's ruling and clarify that stem-cell research derived from embryos is allowed. Congress passed such a measure most recently in 2007 but it was vetoed by then-President George W. Bush.

Drs. Sherley and Deisher said they were talking with congressional aides about why reviving the legislation would be a mistake.

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