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The Ethics of Stem Cell Research

Stem cells are a tiny part in the human body that serve a vital purpose for human beings and for scientific research. These cells are a source for hope for many people with a wide variety of medical issues. This is a subject that has the possibility to effect everyone in some way or another, yet the talk in today’s media is focused on framing highlights for news stories rather than covering the serious aspects such as the ethics behind stem cell research. There is an extensive background behind stem cell research, along with several supporting arguments, and several opposing arguments. Despite the controversy, the public needs to be aware of stem cell research as a whole, and through this awareness, progress can transpire in this area.

Stem cell research is a large topic that still requires a substantial amount of research. Generally speaking, stem cells are also known as “master cells,” and they can develop into bone, blood, and organs. They are unspecified cells that develop to have a specific function in a certain area of the body (US Food and Drug Administration). The big push to research these cells is driven by the fact that stem cells have an unlimited amount of possibilities as to what they can do and cure. Many scientists claim that stem cells have the potential to repair, regenerate, and restore damaged cells of any kind. Many hope that with enough research, embryonic stem cells may eventually be used to treat diseases and medical disorders such as Parkinson’s disease, autoimmune diseases, and paralysis (Stem Cells). The media has taken the hopes that scientists have claimed and have turned these into news stories rather than informing the public about the need for discussion, public support, and funding of this research. Without the publics support of this research and the appropriate funding, the media has created an unrealistic timeline for the development of clinical treatments (Ethics).

Now there are two different forms of stem cells which include adult stem cells and embryonic stem cells. Adult stem cells are those that can be found in grown human beings. They can be found in various locations such as skin, fat tissue, bone marrow, and muscles (Stem Cells). The function of these cells is to repair and enhance damaged tissues when necessary by replenishing the body’s supply of cells (Stem Cells). Embryonic stem cells are much different. These cells can only be found in the very early stages of development (Stem Cells). In order to retrieve these stem cells, an embryo is destroyed. This is where the ethical debate begins.

Those that oppose the use of embryonic stem cells for research rest on two main arguments. The first argument is held by the Food and Drug Administration (USDA). This administration is one of the most important within the United States and its function is to protect citizens from potentially harmful medical practices. For this reason, the FDA has only approved the use of adult stem cells for research and treatments (USDA). This is a topic that could be talked about in the media to break up all of the hype surrounding embryonic stem cell research to show the public that there are serious concerns behind this research (Ethics). The approved adult stem cells include those from bone marrow or umbilical cord blood with the mother’s consent (USDA). These forms of adult stem cells can be regulated tightly, unlike embryonic stem cells, leading to why the FDA has approved these methods and these methods only for the time being.

The second argument against embryonic stem cell research is centered on the belief that life begins at conception. This means that as soon as an egg becomes fertilized, life begins. Each embryo is a unique individual and should be treated with the same rights and moral status as any other human being (Stem Cells). Those who oppose the use of embryonic stem cells believe that if research is allowed to be conducted by destroying these embryos, then there is no respect for human dignity. It is similar to the debate on abortion, in the sense that if life beings at conception, then in order to conduct this research, millions and millions of humans will be murdered. These two strong points are what many people support and use to justify the fact that the use of embryonic stem cell research is not ethical.

Those who advocate for embryonic stem cell research do not think in these terms. The first of the three main points asserts that life does not begin at conception. Those on this side of the argument believe that embryos should not be treated as the same moral status as children or adults. At these early stages, the clump of cells, called an embryo, does not have a nervous system meaning that there is no consciousness or awareness (Stem Cells). There is not a sacrifice in human life to conduct this research because human life has not yet started for these embryos. This is a major aspect that needs to be discussed within the media in order to fully inform the public, which could potentially lead to political action and funding towards this research (Adams).

Advocates also argue that the embryos that would be used for stem cell research are those that have the fate of being discarded at in vitro fertilization clinics. The public needs the complete picture on what is being used for embryonic stem cell research by having the media address this part of the topic (Adams). There are about 400,000 human embryos in these clinics already that will be thawed and discarded in waste bins. These are the embryos that in vitro patients did not need to use because the treatment worked with earlier embryos or they have stopped treatment. Many believe that if they are going to be thrown out and discarded of anyways, then a more beneficial option would be to use them for research that could potentially lead to saving thousands of lives (Rowley). These embryos are viewed by scientists as vital resources and not human life, but to respect the fact that they could have turned into humans, guidelines are in place to respect these resources.

The last supporting point for this side of the argument is that there are guidelines in place to make sure that this research is always conducted ethically. Today’s social platforms are focused on the religious debate on when life begins rather than having a conversation about the guidelines that are already in place as well as creating new ones to allow a broader acceptance of this research (Adams). These guidelines include the fact that all embryos must be obtained with informed consent. No money can be used to pay for these embryos; they must be donated, again, with consent. These standards, along with many others ensure that while this research is being conducted there is a respect for the fact that while these embryos are not living human beings, they could have been (Rowley). For these reasons, many scientists and others believe that the use of embryonic stem cells for research is an ethical practice.

The possibilities involved with stem cell research are far beyond a small group of people to almost everyone. On one side of the ethical argument, millions of lives will be taken in order for this research to be conducted and this is why the FDA has not approved it. On the other side supporting the use of embryonic stem cells are the arguments that life does not begin at conception, the research is conducted with embryos that will simply be thrown away, and there are guidelines to be followed with this research. No matter what side an individual supports, it is clear that a discussion needs to happen to resolve the gridlock regarding the ethics behind embryonic stem cell research. The FDA does not approve embryonic stem cell research and the media is not focusing on informing the public with unbiased facts concerning this topic to allow them to form their own justified opinions. News media is informing the public of the aspects that will get the most views, creating an unrealistic and partial view of this topic (Ethics). There are endless amounts of socially controversial topics talked about in media on a day to day basis, but the media is focusing on the breakthroughs in science rather than the ethics that need to be considered before extensive research can take place.

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