

The Political Scientist

Brooke Ellison

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The ability to view the world through another's eyes is the essence of altruism. When putting their pens to the paper of policy, those who legislate should remove themselves from their own convictions and act for the benefit of the most. This is the basic tenet of democracy, the core belief upon which the United States was founded. However, when looking at the issue of stem cell research, in general, and federally funded research, in specific, our president is inextricably linked to his own,

highly conservative, myopic ideology and has failed both to understand the situation of others and hear their voices.

In September 1990, when I was 11 years old, I was hit by a car while walking home from my first day of 7th grade. That accident left me paralyzed from my neck down and dependent on a ventilator for every breath I take. As a person with a physical disability, each day is a struggle. Tasks that might seem mundane or taken for granted to others are strenuous challenges for me, sometimes taking long hours to complete instead of mere minutes. With the thought of so much potential on the horizon, a series of hopeful hypotheticals rolls in a perpetual cycle through the minds of those bound by physical challenges. When we place our hopes and visions for our world into the hands of those making collective decisions, we do it with the belief that they will act on behalf of our best interest and not on an isolated viewpoint. To do otherwise is bad policy. To undermine the interests of a majority of citizens is bad policy. To ignore the voices and dash the hopes of those most in need is bad policy. Regarding the issue of current stem cell research legislation, these are bad policies, yet they are being upheld. Every day, millions of disabled people think similar thoughts:

"If I could be freed from the confines of my physical condition, what a miracle it would be." Or, maybe, "If, for a single moment, I could wrap my arms around those I love, what a treasure that would be."

And even, "If, by some chance, President Bush might heed some of my recurrent thoughts and change his stance on stem cell research, what a potentially groundbreaking step it would be."

Based on current legislation, these "ifs" likely won't change into reality. On August 9, 2001, from his ranch in Crawford, Texas, President Bush announced that he would significantly limit federal funds to stem cell research, only agreeing to fund research conducted on stem cell lines already in existence. According to this limitation, federally supported research could be conducted on no more than 78 existing genetic cell lines, although even the most optimistic estimates of viable cells were thought to be far fewer, less than two dozen. To the delight of some and the consternation of others, Mr. Bush indicated that the use of embryonic cells for medical research was a violation of the sanctity of life, analogous to abortion or euthanasia. In the President's own words, "I worry about a culture that devalues life, and believe as your President I have an important obligation to foster and encourage respect for life in America and throughout the world... Embryonic stem cell research offers both great promise and great peril. So I have decided we must proceed with great care." Despite millions of testimonies and pleas to the contrary, since that day more than three years ago the opinion of the administration has remained constant and no restrictions have been eased. Despite

strides being made in other countries in the field of stem cell research, the U.S. government has remained resolute in its opposition to it.

Therapeutic stem cell research has the potential to provide cures for a considerable number of neurological and degenerative conditions, including Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, childhood leukemia, heart disease, ALS, several cancers, and spinal cord injuries. The procedure has the potential to affect directly the lives of nearly 100 million people—that's more than one-third of the U.S. population and more than the entire populations of New York, California, Texas, and Florida, combined! Therapeutic stem cell research, however, is sometimes confused with reproductive stem cell procedures, such as genetic engineering, sparking controversy in some political camps. The two types of research differ considerably, though, both in terms of procedure and intent, and represent two diverse ends on a very long, complex spectrum—an understanding that often goes ignored.

Some have argued that using stem cells is just the destruction of one life for the sake of another. To hold such a belief is to view the world in black-and-white terms, thereby ignoring the much more complex gray areas. Yes, it is possible that if a blastocyst, from where stem cells were derived, was to be inserted into a womb and allowed to grow for nine months, there is the potential a life could be born. However, that is not the case for any of the blastocysts that yield stem cells for research. These blastocysts will go unused after *in vitro* fertilization procedures and will never be used to bring about life. These blastocysts, which the President proclaims represent the sanctity of life, will only be kept in freezers at fertility clinics until they have expired, and then they will be discarded. Under current legislation, they are of no use to anybody. To rob the stem cells of their other potential of life, which is to cure diseases or to help regenerate parts of the body, is really to devalue life in another, otherwise avoidable, way.

Others have argued that the work done on stem cells is the same as cloning, and that these cells are essentially promoting the creation of another person. The once almost incomprehensible, futuristic ideas of cloning and "body-doubles" are now considered feasible and fear-some possibilities, and therapeutic stem cell research has been the unwitting victim of the prevalent fears. Orwell's *1984* has somehow come to life in 2004, with the speculations made by some about unintended, science-fiction consequences. But the connection between human reproduction and human therapy is a foggy one at best. The real fear, though, is not the potential of mad scientists reproducing people but the lost potential of sound scientists curing people.

Fourteen years ago, I could have never imagined having to advocate for something that could potentially restore for me the very basic aspects of life and humanity. But, that is something that no one should have to imagine. Science has given medicine more promise than ever before, with the potential to heal and restore people in ways once thought unfathomable. Stem cells, which would otherwise serve no other purpose, hold the promise of life, not just for the newly born but now for the already living, and this opportunity must be seized. The time is now. The time has come when we can change the lives of so many, giving to them the fundamental parts of life and dignity. When he realizes that, maybe President Bush will redefine his right, ethical, and moral conclusion.

Brooke Ellison is a graduate of Harvard University's class of 2000 and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Masters in Public Policy 2004. She is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Stony Brook. *The Brooke Ellison Story*, directed by Christopher Reeve, appeared on A&E.