

Toward Détente on Stem Cell Research

A conversation with LeRoy Walters.

LeRoy B. Walters, a member of HHMI's bioethics advisory board, likes to wrestle with broad, compelling issues—such as whether it is ever justifiable to kill another human being, and if so, when? But in the past three years, Walters, a professor of ethics and philosophy at Georgetown University's Kennedy Institute of Ethics in Washington, D.C., has become increasingly absorbed by specific questions involving the use of human embryonic stem (ES) cells in medical research. He is fascinated by the rapidly changing, often-contradictory policies on this research in the United States and abroad.

His goal is to clarify the options and then propose thoughtful solutions. With his gentle manner in the face of heated arguments, he can be firm without giving offense. "In the end," Walters says, "we have to make public policies that try to reach an accommodation among a wide variety of religious and nonreligious viewpoints."

In research on human ES cells, is the United States the world's most conservative nation?

Walters: Maybe not, but we're close. The world has changed a great deal since August 9, 2001, when President Bush announced his policy of limiting federal spending for human ES cell research to cell lines that were established at that time. Unfortunately, there are only 19 approved ES cell lines, as opposed to NIH's original estimate of about 60, and even some of these do not grow well.

Meanwhile, more and more countries in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia have been liberalizing their policies on human ES cell research—even on cloning for medical research. The United Kingdom has always been quite liberal in this regard; so have China and Israel. India and Belgium also accept cloning for research purposes.

Unfortunately, in the United States the issue of human ES research has become tied up with the abortion question, which is not as much in the forefront of debate in other coun-

tries. Consequently, the U.S. is running the risk of falling behind in this area of research.

Do you think it's ethical to do research on human ES cells when this requires damaging very early human embryos?



Walters: In my view, the argument that all early embryos should be protected from harm is not convincing. We know that they can split into two, becoming twins, or that two embryos can combine into one.

We also know that in natural human reproduction only about 35 percent of early embryos develop to maturity in the mother's womb, while the others die. On the positive side, ES cells have become integral to the understanding of human development and disease. In the long run, they may open up new pathways to therapy for such devastating illnesses as juvenile-onset diabetes, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, or for spinal-cord injuries.

To argue against ES cell use, one needs to introduce religious premises—especially about the endowment of the embryo with a soul at the time of fertilization.

What role should the government play in all this?

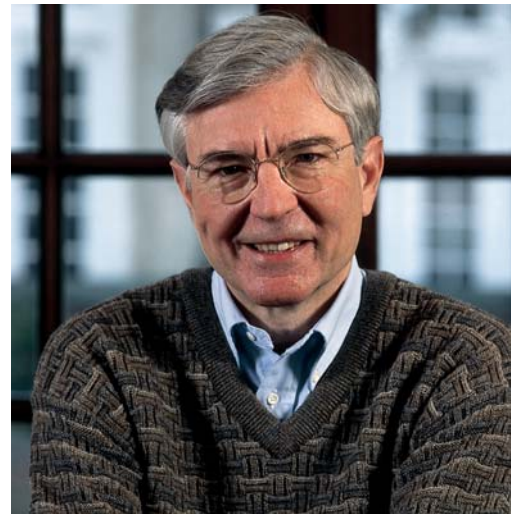
Walters: When I had the chance to talk with President Bush about this question three years ago, I suggested that he set up a special advisory committee of scientists and bioethicists—some 8 to 12 people—to help keep our human ES cell research policies fresh and flexible. If such a committee had been in place in 2002 or 2003, it could have indicated how few established ES cell lines there really were. Or perhaps the president's advisers could have pointed to new data about adult stem cells that show such cells are not as promising as some people had hoped.

The president did in fact establish a council on bioethics with a much broader mandate.

In its first report, a narrow majority of this council proposed a four-year ban on cloning for biomedical research. This action would have been disastrous for basic research, in my view, and the U.S. Senate has wisely rejected such proposals. A subsequent council report was unduly optimistic about the prospects for research with adult stem cells. Because Congress has not taken any action on this issue, it has fallen to the states to set their own policies for human-embryo research. Given that only 11 states prohibit such research, most state legislatures are more liberal than the federal government on this subject. Evidently, 39 states see the possibilities opened up by research on human ES cells and don't want to miss out on them.

Would you place any limits on research with human ES cells?

Walters: The United Kingdom provides an excellent model for public oversight. Each year its licensing authority issues a public report on



LeRoy Walters seeks accommodation in stem cell policies.

the institutions that are doing research on human embryos, who the investigators are, and what topics they are studying. The authority also keeps statistics on how many embryos are being used in research. That's the kind of transparency we need. I think the balance is strongly in favor of going forward with this research. At the same time, however, I think that U.S. researchers should be willing to participate in a moderate, flexible system of public oversight.

—MAYA PINES