



## Bernard Siegel — The US stem cell dilemma

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**Pharmaceutical Technology Europe interviews Bernard Siegel, Founder and Executive Director of the Genetics Policy Institute (GPI), a leading proponent of embryonic stem cell research. GPI believes that lifting stem cell funding restrictions by executive order is only the first step towards safeguarding stem cell research.**

**Q1: While in office, George W. Bush implemented policies that made life difficult for stem cell researchers in the US. Can you tell our European readers more about these policies?**

On 9 August 2001, George Bush announced that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) would allow funding for human embryonic stem cell research (hESCR) only for cell lines in existence as of that time and date. Bush did not want the government complicit in research that potentially harmed or destroyed embryos. Most stem cell advocates viewed this policy as arbitrary and flawed, and the practical effect was to severely limit NIH funding for this promising field.

**Q2: What will rescinding Bush's policy on stem cells mean to the scientific community?**

Lifting the restrictions will definitely advance the field of hESCR. For the first time, we will have clear regulations emanating from the federal government and an increased flow of funding for research on the many new embryonic stem cell lines created after the 2001 policy pronouncement. In many ways, the new stem cell lines are an improvement to the 21 lines approved in 2001. The new lines are free of animal proteins and, in some cases, are disease specific, representing important tools for scientific discovery.

**Q3: As well as lifting funding restrictions by presidential executive order, what other actions should be taken by Obama and Congress to enable stem cell research?**

For the new policy to become permanent, a law should be enacted that allows funding for research on cell lines, without regard to the time that they were derived.

**Q4: Do you think action will be taken against the Dickey-Wicker Amendment?**

The Dickey-Wicker Amendment is the root cause of the confusing American policy. Enacted in 1996 as part of the perennial appropriations budget for the Department of Health and Human Services, Dickey forbids NIH funding on research harming or destroying human embryos. It serves as a blockade to funding to derive new cell lines or nuclear transfer (therapeutic cloning). The architecture of the Bush policy, and possibly the Obama policy, is to allow some federal funding only for stem cell lines that were *created* without federal funding in the first place. Using federally funded equipment, supplies and personnel funded with grants from NIH cannot be used to derive new lines (where embryos are harmed or destroyed). Dickey-Wicker forbids such action. To do so would place the entire institution's funding in jeopardy. It is time to recognize the legal and moral inconsistencies

inherent in the policy. The Dickey-Wicker Amendment should be repealed, but it remains to be seen whether President Obama and Congress have the farsightedness to take this on.

**Q5: There are fewer restrictions against stem cell research in Europe. In contrast to the US, what progress has been made?**

I think Europe must be viewed on a country-by-country basis: we see major strides in hESCR in the UK, Spain and Sweden are at the vanguard, and Germany has recently relaxed its restrictions somewhat. There is tremendous potential for the research in Europe. Much of Europe's accomplishments in the field will be on display at the annual meeting of the International Society for Stem Cell Research, which that will take place in Barcelona and the 2009 World Stem Cell Summit in Baltimore.

**Q6: On the GPI website, stem cell research has been hailed as "the greatest scientific innovation of our time". Why is this?**

The study of stem cells may reveal the root causes of diseases, serve as a valuable tool for drug discovery and lead to cell therapies. All of this is a paradigm shift and, in the age of the Internet and decipherment of the human genome, could be a scientific revolution in our lifetimes.

**Q7: In a recent press release, GPI stated that laws should be enacted that fully promote "ethically sound embryonic stem cell research." What encompasses ethically sound embryonic stem cell research?**

One would be well served to read *The Morality of Embryo Use* by Harvard philosopher Louis Guenin, who has set forth the case that it is morally permissible to decline intrauterine transfer of an embryo formed *in vitro*, and from permission of the donors that their embryos be utilized for scientific research only, there follows a consensus justification for using the embryos in service of humanitarian ends. The ethical discussion should be reframed to focus upon donative intent. Where the embryo is donated with the strict proviso that the donation is for scientific research only, and that the embryo be barred from transfer into a womb, such embryo cannot become a person as its development is bounded. Rather than the sacrifice of the embryo be in vain, it may be utilized for potentially life-saving medical research.

**Q8: There are many moral implications surrounding stem cell research. How difficult is it for scientists to face these issues?**

Scientists cannot become glued to their microscopes; they must learn to engage in discourse in the public square. Societies have responsibility to erect the fences as to what is permissible scientific research and what is not — scientists would be well served to lead the debate. The consequence of remaining silent is to cede ground to the ever present and angry voices of ignorance, intolerance and fear.

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