Letter to the Editor: 12/14/2015

As scientists and staff at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, we oppose legislation currently under consideration in Wisconsin that would harm biomedical research in the state and deny patients the benefits of this research.

The legislation in both the Assembly and Senate criminalizes the use of fetally-derived tissue, cells or cell lines in research that aims to improve the lives of Wisconsin citizens and the lives of people around the world. If passed, the legislation would severely restrict promising avenues of biomedical research for conditions such as diabetes, Down syndrome, heart failure, Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injury and more. Furthermore, the bill would make felons of the scientists who use fetal tissue to find therapies for disease.

Fetal tissue has been used in research for more than 80 years. Fetal tissue and derived cells that are donated for research are obtained and used legally and ethically in biomedical research. In 1988, a bipartisan federal panel deemed research on tissue from abortions to be ethical because of the promise it affords, provided women are not asked to donate before they decide to terminate their pregnancies and no one profits. The recommendations of this panel became federal law and researchers in Wisconsin abide by it. In fact, fetal tissue research at UW-Madison is held to even higher standards.

Researchers are working hard on alternatives to the use of fetal tissue and cells. In recent years, new technologies have replaced fetal tissue and cell lines in some studies. But, alternatives do not exist for every situation and are sometimes far less effective. For example, adult stem cells may be a viable alternative. Yet, the study of these cells is still in its early stages, and the use of fetal tissue is still necessary to validate the work. We use fetal tissue and cells in research when no other approach will do.

The proposed legislation would have a negative impact on the availability of new cell therapies being developed for many diseases. Around the world, research using fetal tissue and cells could lead to therapies for a wide range of diseases including neurological disorders (ALS, Parkinson’s disease, spinal cord injuries), adverse pregnancy outcomes (miscarriages, pre-eclampsia), immune rejection (graft-host disease) and heart disease (cardiac arrhythmias). If these therapies prove to be successful and involve the use of fetal cells, patients in Wisconsin would not be allowed to take advantage of them as their physicians could not legally provide the treatment in Wisconsin. These patients would be forced to leave the state to seek these promising new treatments.

While we recognize there is considerable debate concerning this issue, with additional changes being considered, we call on legislators to remove language with implications for research from the bill. We ask the legislature and governor to consider the ethical impact of this legislation and to consider what we deny the people of Wisconsin by criminalizing this promising and beneficial research. Rather than reducing abortions, the legislation will negatively impact many lives. Rather than fetal material being used to find treatments for many diseases, it will instead be discarded. Biomedical researchers will be subject to criminalization for trying to ease the suffering of others and may leave Wisconsin, taking their grant money and staff with them. Wisconsin will be viewed as a state that not only does not value biomedical research but denies patients the benefits of this research.
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