

February 11, 2005

Testimony in opposition to SJ 18

SENATE PUBLIC HEALTH, WELFARE & SAFETY

EXHIBIT NO. 17

DATE: 2-11-05

BILL NO. SJR 18

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

My name is Eric Schiedermayer. I represent the Montana Catholic Conference, the voice for Montana's two Roman Catholic bishops in the state legislature, who in turn are the spiritual leaders of over 140,000 Montanans.

Whereas Senate Joint Resolution 18 contains a number of misleading statements in its "whereas" clauses; and whereas even the title of the bill itself is built around such misleading statements; I strongly urge this committee to table this bill.

Like Senator Toole, I have a packet of handouts which provide some background on stem cell research and which do a pretty effective job of supporting Montana's timber industry. The forests are still wailing over all the trees that were killed to bring you these.

But I want to speak directly to the bill. This bill is built upon three premises which are false and misleading.

First, the claim that "the source of cells with the greatest potential to aid in the healing of diseased or injured human beings is the human embryo." Current research belies this statement. In fact, embryonic stem cells have NEVER helped a human patient. Problems of tumor formation, uncontrollability, and genetic instability have prevented embryonic stem cells from being safely used in human trials.

On the other hand, stem cells from adult tissues and umbilical cord blood have proven benefits, with new uses being continually discovered. Over a hundred different conditions, including, Parkinson's disease, heart damage, spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis and corneal damage, have been successfully treated with stem cells obtained from morally acceptable sources – sources that did NOT require the destruction of human life.

Secondly, this bill implies that the federal 2001 ruling prohibits research using embryonic stem cells. That ruling did not prohibit ANY such research. In fact the ruling *approved* for the first time federal funding of embryonic stem cell research; it merely said that federally funded research would use only "existing embryonic stem cell lines where the life and death decision has already been made."

There is NO legal limit on the amount of funding that can be used for human embryonic stem cell research; the federal government gave \$25 million to such research in 2003 alone. If this amount is relatively small, it is chiefly because researchers are not requesting such funds, as they are finding OTHER avenues – those involving stem cells obtained from adults and umbilical cord blood – more promising, and are focusing their efforts there. Savvy venture capitalists have poured their money into adult stem cell research, leaving embryonic stem cell researchers desperate to feed at the state trough.

Finally, the bill implies that "a large majority of Americans" favor embryonic stem cell research. In fact a post-election survey conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health showed that of all the health care issues presented, Americans were LEAST concerned about funding for stem cell research. And that survey did not differentiate between embryonic and adult stem cell

research. Other surveys have found that when asked if the government should fund stem cell research which requires destroying human embryos, 70 percent of Americans say "no," and when choosing between funding stem cell research which *includes* embryonic stem cells vs. research *without* embryonic stem cells, Americans support the latter by a margin of 67 to 18 percent.

The other day, Senator Toole used a phrase which has stuck with me. Speaking on another senate resolution that he is sponsoring, he said, "Welcome to the culture wars." This bill is not about science. This bill is about the culture war being waged in our society. Will we establish a culture of life or a culture of death? The choice is not between science and ethics, but between science that is ethically responsible and science that is not.

The Nuremberg Code, drafted in response to the horrors of Nazi war crimes, declared: "No experiment should be conducted where there is an a priori reason to believe that death will occur..." This code inspired many later declarations, including the World Medical Association's 1964 Helsinki Declaration, which states: "In medical research on human subjects, considerations related to the well-being of the human subjects should take precedence over the interests of science and society." Finally, the Geneva Declaration had physicians swear that "I will maintain the utmost respect for human life, from the time of conception."

The Catholic Church and many other people of good reject utilitarian approaches to human life which treat helpless or unpopular members of the human race as mere means to an end. We stand with the voiceless and the vulnerable. We will continue to proclaim the intrinsic dignity and worth of EVERY human life.

Let's continue to focus our funding on promising medical research that *everybody* can live with.

Respectfully submitted,

Eric Schiedermayer

Executive Director, Montana Catholic Conference