

## White House Wants Fetal Research Ban

*Draft presidential order would halt studies of tissue from aborted fetuses; White House retreats a bit in face of sharp opposition from scientists*

JUST DAYS BEFORE a high level advisory panel was scheduled to meet to explore the ethical and scientific issues pertinent to experimentation with human fetuses, a conservative White House aide, known for his strong antiabortion stance, tried to block practically all fetal research by executive order. Gary Bauer, assistant to the President for policy development, drafted an order forbidding all federally funded research on tissues from aborted fetuses. It was leaked to the press by opponents of his extreme Right-to-Life views and prompted a predictable outcry by biomedical scientists who objected both to the order and to Bauer's tactics. With only a few months left in office, the Reagan Administration is running out of time—hence, an attempt to do by executive order something that probably could not be done through legislation. A number of scientists made urgent contact with Republican congressmen, hoping to get the White House to back off.

A ban on fetal research would be devastating to scientific experimentation in a number of areas, including Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, diabetes, cancer, and AIDS. For instance, NIH is currently supporting studies of the AIDS virus and the central nervous system, using rapidly dividing cells from aborted fetuses. In one study, investigators are trying to isolate fetal brain cells, grow them in vitro, and determine their susceptibility to infection with the AIDS virus. There is also ongoing work on the way the AIDS virus is transmitted from a mother to her unborn child that requires analysis of fetal tissues.

As one noted scientist said, "If the President goes ahead with this, he could create a situation in which Gays are pitted against the Right-to-Lifers."

Within days, the White House beat a modest retreat. Presidential spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said on 9 September that the draft order was nothing more than a "very first cut" that "does not represent Administration policy or a presidential decision in any way. However, it is unlikely that the President will issue no fetal research order until hearing from the Administration's own "human fetal tissue transplantation research panel" which is meeting at the National

Institutes of Health as this issue of *Science* goes to press.

The panel, comprised of ethicists, religious leaders, physicians, lawyers, and representatives of minority groups, was appointed last summer at the direction of Robert Windom, assistant secretary for health in the Reagan Administration, in direct response to a request from NIH for guidance on the transplantation of fetal tissue into Parkinson's victims.

### ***A ban on the use of fetal tissue would have a devastating effect on medical research for diseases including AIDS, diabetes, and Alzheimer's***

An NIH physician, with the approval of the institutes' human subjects review board, wanted permission to transplant fetal tissue into a patient in the expectation that it would alleviate the awful tremors of Parkinson's. NIH director James B. Wyngaarden, aware of the sensitivity of this research, sought Windom's permission even though he was not legally required to do so. Windom called for more study and submitted a series of questions for consideration.

At present, NIH supports 116 grants and contracts that involve human fetal tissue, at a total cost of \$11 million a year. Existing regulations govern the circumstances in which the tissue can be obtained and state that researchers who will use the tissue are not permitted to have any part in decisions about whether or when a woman is to have an abortion. In addition to studies relating to human disease, fetal tissue is crucial to basic research on cell division and differentiation. Because fetal tissue is fragile and dies quickly after the death of a fetus, it is almost impossible to get tissue from a spontaneous abortion in time to use it, which is why doctors must rely on planned abortions. And although it is not yet pos-

sible to grow large quantities of fetal cells for research, scientists expect that, with recombinant DNA techniques, this may be possible in the future, thereby decreasing reliance on fresh tissue from recently deceased fetuses.

The panel that has been assembled to evaluate the ethical and scientific issues surrounding fetal research is headed by Arlin Adams, a retired U.S. Court of Appeals judge from Philadelphia who has written on the role of religious leaders in developing public policy. Leroy Walters, an ethicist from Georgetown University, will chair discussions of ethical and legal issues. Kenneth Ryan, an obstetrician and researcher at Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital, will oversee the scientific debate.

Both Walters and Ryan have long experience in this area of public policy through their association with the congressionally mandated National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, which studied fetal research issues in the 1970s and devised many of the guidelines that are in force today.

The religious leaders who have been part of the fetal research debate in the past have voiced support for these studies as long as ethical guidelines are observed. In this, the group, which includes Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, and Jews, differs from Right-to-Life groups whose opposition is closer to absolute. People representing both sides will speak at the NIH meeting, as will a number of people representing patient groups.

A spokesman for the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation International, which includes actress Mary Tyler Moore and hockey hero Wayne Gretsky on its board, will describe promising work on transplantation of fetal islet cells into diabetics. So far, 30 diabetics are alive and well and producing insulin after transplantation of islet cells from a fetal pancreas. The National Right to Life Committee, Inc., will speak against the use of any tissue from deliberately aborted fetuses, calling it "insanity."

The tissue research panel will report on its deliberations before the Reagan Administration leaves office.

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