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## **A Changed Stem Cell Debate**

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Sometimes political discussions get so bogged down that people's views get set in stone. With advocates on both sides of a contentious issue preaching to the choir, the hope of actually persuading anyone diminishes as each side's talking points become more predictable. But sometimes the facts on the ground change in a way that alters a debate overnight.

The recent news that the promise of stem cell research can be pursued without using human embryos has permanently and dramatically changed the stem cell debate.

The starting point in the debate over embryonic stem cell research focuses on the status of the youngest of humans: Is it a person or a piece of property? But the prospect of exciting new research and medical treatments made this a very difficult question.

When I entered the United States Senate in 1996, I had no idea that I would eventually consider stem cell research as one of the most important policy issues in which I am involved. In fact, I do not think I had even heard of stem cells.

The isolation of embryonic stem cells by Dr. James Thomson in 1998 put the issue of stem cell research on the map. Although he never banned this research outright, President Bush limited federal funding for research to the embryonic stem cell lines that existed before August 2001, thus drawing a line at destroying human embryos created after that date. He supported legislation that I co-sponsored that would fund the banking of umbilical-cord blood, in addition to efforts to fund adult stem cell research and alternatives that would not destroy human embryos.

While President Bush stood firm, the issue of stem cell research appeared to be a political winner for Democrats and to pit the claims of science against strict ethical guidelines.

But the facts on the ground have changed. The same Dr. James Thomson, in addition to other scientists working independently, recently published studies arguing that science can pursue the most promising stem cell research without killing, or even using, human embryos. This new approach is so promising that Ian Wilmut, the scientist who cloned the sheep Dolly, announced that he would not move forward with human cloning.

This shifts the debate fundamentally. Those who had moral reservations about research on the youngest of humans but were persuaded of the need to pursue treatments can now support this promising research without compromising their pro-life conviction. At the same time, those who claimed that embryonic research was the only promising way forward can unite around a promising new technique that presents no ethical dilemmas.

What the vast majority of Americans want is now possible: the pursuit of promising research that does not cross ethical lines, honors human dignity, and preserves innocent life.

This does not mark the end of the stem cell debate. In the coming weeks, I will work with my Senate colleagues on possible ways to allocate funding for this approach and for other research that seeks ethical cures we can be proud of. I will continue to push for a ban on all forms of human cloning, a practice that demeans the dignity of the human person.

The irony is that opponents of embryonic stem cell research were considered to be anti-science or behind the times. Advocates of embryonic stem cell research were thought to be in a long line of pioneers fighting the restraints of religious doctrine to push forward with scientific research.

Instead, quite the opposite is the case. The new research shows that science and morality need not be pitted against each another. Still less, the promise of cures for disease need not be pitted against the infinite value of the youngest of human lives.

Rather, what we knew in our hearts all along has turned out to be true. The strong ought to protect the weak and science is not to be feared, nor is it to be worshiped, but rather it should be regulated by sound ethical guidelines. In doing so, science has shown the path forward: ethical research, promising science, and cures everyone can live with.

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