

Support for embryonic stem cell research increasing

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Peggy Willocks describes herself as a conservative, pro-life Christian in “the heart of the Bible Belt,” Johnson City, Tenn. So when she considered embryonic stem cell research two years ago, she found it morally repulsive.

“I was equating it with killing a child,” said Willocks, 54, who now gives talks in support of such research. “I thought of it as grinding up fetuses and all of that, so I didn't want any part of it.”

Peggy Willocks,
who describes
herself as a
conservative, pro-
life Christian in
"the heart of the
Bible Belt,"
argues for stem
cell research
while addressing
the Washington-
based Parkinson's
Action Network,
an advocacy
group. (Photo
courtesy of
Parkinson's
Action Network)

What changed Willocks was a personal experience. She watched a friend and a fellow Parkinson's sufferer get to where she could move only her eyes for two months before dying. Willocks then went back to her Bible, recalled God's compassion for the living and determined that cells in a Petri dish aren't sacred because Scripture informs her that "life begins in the womb," she said.

Surveys show Willocks is not alone in her reassessment. A Gallup poll taken in May found 60 percent of Americans say medical research involving stem cells from human embryos is "morally acceptable." That's up significantly from May 2002, when 52 percent held that opinion, according to Gallup research.

December 2004 polling data from the Washington-based Pew Research Center for the People and the Press points to a similar trend toward growing support over the past three years.

As with abortion, much hinges on the moral status of biological material that could one day become a full-fledged human being. Although the moral concerns echo those of firmly entrenched factions in the abortion debate, conclusions reached in the stem cell debate are proving far more tenuous, even for people of faith.

In explaining the discrepancy, observers point to American pragmatism. Americans tingle at the prospect of curing previously deadly diseases, they say, and that potential to save lives has a way of making the protection of embryos a concern of lesser importance.

“The hope for medical breakthroughs is outweighing the destruction of embryos,” said Carroll Doherty, editor at the Pew Center. “Is there less concern for the embryo? I don't think so. People are just feeling it's worth it” to attain a greater good.

Pew polling shows the greatest surge in support among Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants, especially those who said they didn't know what to think on the issue two years ago. In March 2002, for instance, 43 percent of white Catholics said it was more important to conduct embryonic stem cell research than to protect embryos. By December 2004, that climbed to 63 percent. Among non-evangelical Protestants, the percentage prioritizing research grew from 51 percent to 69 percent over the same period. As Willocks' change of heart shows, developments close to home can play a huge role.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., said he is “adamantly against abortion,” but he became a committed advocate for embryonic stem cell research after his wife gave birth to triplets last year via in vitro fertilization. He now

believes “a fertilized egg is not a human being until it is implanted in a mother's womb.”

“I hadn't thought it through too much before that,” Rohrabacher said. “I'd have to say my personal experience had a lot to do with my position. ... To say 'life begins at conception'-we have to realize that science now has made that phrase obsolete.”

Among the general public, Pew polling from last December showed opposition to embryonic research to be firmest among those who attend religious services weekly. In that group, 50 percent prioritized protecting the embryo, versus 38 percent who said doing research is more important.

Yet even among this group, support for research is growing. In March 2002, only 28 percent had said research is more important than protecting embryos. Most of the new support in this group, Doherty said, is coming from those who were undecided in 2002.

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