



Ethics and Stem Cell Research

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What is Ethics?

As individuals we are faced with a constant stream of choices between different behaviours and courses of action in our daily lives. In deciding how to choose the right path we must call upon our own understanding of what is right and good. Societies also face numerous similar decisions. Decisions such as who should have health care coverage and at what price, whether immigration policy should be strict or relaxed, what is the appropriate scope and severity of criminal law and even who should pay taxes all rely on an ethical bedrock shared by the majority of the citizens and/or the government. That ethical bedrock will include notions of what constitutes justice, fairness and equality, to name a few values.

Underlying our individual and societal decisions about good and right behaviour is some concept about what it means to be a good person leading a good life. That concept may differ from individual to individual but in societal decision making the decision purports to embody a shared vision of the good life. Ethical decision making can be approached a number of different ways. Some people believe that the right course of action will be dictated by the consequences that will follow: will the good outweigh the bad? Some people believe that there are some virtues, such as honesty or generosity that will guide moral individuals to make ethical decisions. Still others believe that the intentions and moral integrity of the person who is making the decision are key to making ethical decisions, regardless of consequences.

Talking about ethics can be complicated. Conversations about ethics start with our moral intuitions but don't end there. They involve asking questions about virtues, values, costs, risks and benefits. People will disagree not only about what the benefits, costs and risks are, but also on how they should be weighed. Beyond a cost/benefit analysis, ethics involves discussions about those values and virtues we hold as individuals and those we keep as a society. Many discussions about ethics will center on identifying what values are at stake. Still others will argue over whether the values (such as human dignity) actually exist. Talking about ethics is important and useful. Not only do we learn more about the values, costs, and benefits at play, but we learn more about how others in our society think. This exchange of ideas and beliefs is crucial to understanding, respecting and tolerating others who may think differently than we do.

How people approach ethics will depend on their own religious, philosophical and cultural traditions. Their own experiences will also be reflected in their ethical decision making. In a pluralistic society there will be disagreement on some issues. Intelligent, thoughtful people can disagree over whether a particular course of action is ethical or not. Even when large sections of a society disagree on the ethical course of action, often some course of action must still be chosen. Ethics conversations help policymakers make informed, thoughtful, transparent decisions about how to proceed where members of society are not in agreement over what is the right thing to do.

Ethics and Stem Cell Research

Stem cell research is a broad scientific and medical endeavour. As such, it involves questions of ethics that are commonly raised in research, such as preserving research integrity and the use of human tissue and animals in research. Much stem cell research is ultimately aimed at a clinical application, thus questions about what constitutes research and what constitutes therapy will arise. In addition, ethical issues that are part of the clinician-patient relationship, such as confidentiality and informed consent, are also implicated. Stem cells are also found in human embryos and raise ethical issues commonly

involved in the use of human reproductive tissue and the use of embryos in research. Finally, the ethics of public versus private funding of stem cell research as well as the ethics of creating markets and property rights in the materials, such as human ova, and products of stem cell research also need exploration. These are but a few of the ethical issues that form the ethical backdrop of stem cell research. One of the important threshold questions to ask is whether stem cell research raises any new or unique ethical issues not raised in other contexts.

All of these issues are discussed in other Stem Cell Network ethics white papers.

References

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