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Put to the Test

GOP Avoids Abortion For Now, but Science Is Stirring the Debate

Research That Kills Embryos But May Fight Diseases Prompts Reassessments

A Senator and His Conscience

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PHILADELPHIA—Republicans may have called a truce in their civil war over abortion, but don't expect it to hold. Scientific advances are reshaping abortion politics.

Consider Sen. Gordon Smith. The National Right to Life Committee says the Oregon Republican voted the right way on abortion every time last year. But when an Oregon antiabortion activist asked him a few weeks ago to defend a prohibition on extracting stem cells from human embryos because the procedure kills the embryos, he declined. Someday, he told her, researchers might be able to turn such cells into neurons that would relieve the Parkinson's disease that has ravaged his family.

"I've had many people who have died slowly," he told the activist. "Part of my pro-life ethic is to make life better for the living."

The debate over abortion has roiled Republican conventions since the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision of 1973. This year, George W. Bush persuaded delegates to bury the issue by leaving unchanged the antiabortion language included in previous party platforms.

The less time taken up with the abortion question, he and other Republican leaders felt, the better. The platform committee voted down all proposals by abortion-rights advocates, including one to simply "welcome people on all sides of this complex issue." Mr. Bush, says Maryland delegate Ellen Sauerbrey, "was trying to avoid abortion becoming the center of the campaign."

Even if he succeeds, new fronts are opening in the debate. Genetic technology is deepening ethical dilemmas and opening fissures within the antiabortion movement, and even within the abortion-rights side.



Gordon Smith

Over the next few years, for instance, prenatal tests will be developed that can detect whether fetuses are prone to develop breast cancer and other maladies when they become adults. Unlike the familiar Down's syndrome test, which gives a yes or no answer, the new tests will reveal only the odds for developing a condition, and one that wouldn't arrive for years. While the new tests won't change anything for those dead-set against abortion, they could complicate the issue for others.

Stem Cells

There is also a gathering controversy over so-called therapeutic cloning. Scientists would clone an embryo of a patient, which would essentially be used for spare parts or to test new treatments, and be destroyed in the process. A British biomedical advisory group is expected to recommend that the U.K. government endorse work on the technology.

In the U.S., the next big abortion fight is likely to focus on the discovery in late 1998 that stem cells—precursor cells that can develop into brain, blood and any other tissue—can be harvested from human embryos stored at fertility clinics. Since the harvesting kills the embryo, the technology raises in a new way the intimate question at the heart of the abortion debate: When, if ever, is it acceptable to sacrifice the unborn?

The presidential candidates line up in predictable ways. Gov. Bush, an abortion foe, opposes the new technology. Vice President Gore, an abortion-rights advocate, supports it. But some others in the anti-abortion and abortion-rights camps are struggling with the issue and re-examining their views.

Using stem cells, scientists are working to develop replacements for tissue damaged in Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's, diabetes and other conditions. The cells also might be useful following chemotherapy for cancer. Thus, the abortion debate doesn't involve just a woman and her embryo or fetus. This new technology brings in another party: a disease-sufferer who might benefit from tissue collected from embryos or fetuses.

Support for Research

Citing the promise of the new technology, Sen. Smith and a few other antiabortion Republicans whose families have been battered by disease have declined to support a blanket opposition to stem-cell research with embryos. They include Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, whose daughter has diabetes, Sen. Connie Mack of Florida, whose family is riddled with cancer, and Rep. Duke Cunningham of California, a prostate-cancer survivor. Some other antiabortion Republicans are privately offering their backing for embryo research, as well.

"There's a weakening on the part of pro-family groups on this issue," agrees conservative activist Paul Weyrich.

Opponents of embryo research see it
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