

RONALD REAGAN'S LEGACY

By Gov. Howard Dean M.D.

Most Americans would agree that Ronald Reagan had some solid accomplishments as president, although the rush by the rightwing to put his face on the ten dollar bill or on Mt. Rushmore seems a bit hasty. Ironically, one of his greatest accomplishments may occur after his death, and that is the extraordinary effort by his wife, Nancy, to use the circumstances of his death to educate people about the benefits of stem cell research.

Let me be clear about this, I am a Democrat and was not a fan of the Reagan administration's policies. But over the last ten years, no American could fail to admire the exceptional courage of Mrs. Reagan as she lived what must have been a very difficult existence watching her husband inexorably lose all his mental faculties, unable to even recognize his wife.

Mrs. Reagan also seems to understand how exceptionally difficult life must be for the thousands of other American families who do not have the support systems accorded to ex-presidents and how important hope is to all those families. Hope takes the form of a potential cure, which means hope requires medical research, which some religious authorities may not like. Mrs. Reagan has the courage to stand up against the anti-scientific biases of many in the Republican Party and to call for science to be respected and hope to be restored.

There is no guarantee that stem cell research can produce a cure for Alzheimer's disease. But stem cells show promise by helping to prevent or cure chronic and life-shortening diseases such as diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's and various cardiac diseases.

Many Republicans continue to link stem cell research to the abortion debate. Nothing could be further from the truth. Embryonic stem cells come from embryos which have been created for the purpose of helping infertile couples have children. In this process, a few embryos may be implanted in a woman's uterus, to be born nine months later. A much larger number of embryos will be frozen for future use. The vast majority of these will ultimately be discarded. But, these discarded embryos can produce something good, they can potentially save the life or health of a stranger. Stem cells, the basis of all the cells in our body, can be saved from these embryos, and can become tissue which can potentially replace diseased tissue in human beings who are suffering greatly, as President Reagan did. Or these embryos can be discarded, as they usually are now.

What Mrs. Reagan and other advocates of stem cell research are asking is that the embryos be put to humanitarian and scientific uses, instead of being wasted. Perhaps the research will fail. But, if we do not try, we will never know. President Bush has confined stem cell research to such a few cell-lines, which makes most American research meaningless.

Most of the research is now going on in other countries, with a few exceptions in the U.S., such as wealthy universities that can afford to refuse federal funding. This means that Americans who suffer these diseases will be last in line to get the benefits of this potentially extraordinary research. It also means a generation of American scientists and doctors will fall behind their foreign counterparts in using whatever lifesaving technologies come out of this research.

As a physician, I am embarrassed that America would willingly and deliberately choose to set aside science and the hope it offers. As a Democrat, I say to Nancy Reagan, I'll do whatever I can to help you win this one for the Gipper.

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I'm With My Dad on Stem Cell Research

By Michael Reagan

The media continues to report that the Reagan "family" is in favor of stem cell research, when the truth is that two members of the family have been long time foes of this process of manufacturing human beings - my dad, Ronald Reagan during his lifetime, and I.

The media should keep in mind that we are also members of the Reagan "family," and my father, as I do, opposed the creation of human embryos for the sole purpose of using their stem cells as possible medical cures.

Moreover, using the widely promoted and thoroughly discredited argument that stem cell research can lead to a cure of Alzheimer's disease, the media and proponents of stem cell research have suggested that had the research been done a long time ago, my dad might have avoided the ordeal he endured. This is junk science at its worst.

As William Clark, dad's national security advisor, interior secretary and one of my dad's closest friends and aides wrote in a recent op-ed piece in the New York Times my father's "suffering under Alzheimer's disease was tragic, and we should do everything we can that is ethically proper to help others afflicted with it. But I have no doubt that he would have urged our nation to look to adult stem cell research - which has yielded many clinical successes - and away from the destruction of developing human lives, which has yielded none." And he warned, "Those who would trade on Ronald Reagan's legacy should first consider his own words."

Here's what my father said way back in 1983: "My administration is dedicated to the preservation of America as a free land and there is no cause more important for preserving that freedom than affirming the transcendent right to life of all human beings, the right without which no other rights have any meaning."

To make matters worse, those arguing for embryonic stem cells have embarked on a campaign of disinformation, claiming that there are scientific reasons for believing that their research can be expected to lead to a cure for Alzheimer's disease.

Listen to what Ronald D.G. McKay, a stem cell researcher at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke told the Washington Post: "People need a fairy tale," he said, explaining why scientists have allowed society to believe wrongly that stem cells are likely to effectively treat Alzheimer's disease. He added "Maybe that's unfair, but they need a story line that's relatively simple to understand."

A story line that is a flat out lie.

Writing in the Weekly Standard, lawyer, ethicist and human life advocate Wesley J. Smith reported that "Researchers have apparently known for some time that embryonic stem cells will not be an effective treatment for Alzheimer's, because as two researchers told a Senate subcommittee in May, it is a 'whole brain disease,' rather than a cellular disorder (such as Parkinson's). This has generally been kept out of the news. But now, Washington Post correspondent Rick Weiss, has blown the lid off of the scam, reporting that while useful abstract information might be gleaned about Alzheimer's through embryonic stem cell research, 'stem cell experts confess . . . that of all the diseases that may be someday cured by embryonic stem cell treatments, Alzheimer's is among the least likely to benefit.'"

People such as Nancy, however, have been allowed to believe otherwise - "a distortion," Weiss writes that "is not being aggressively corrected by scientists." Why? The false story line helps generate public support for the biotech political agenda. As Weiss noted, "It [Nancy Reagan's statement in support of ESCR] is the kind of advocacy that researchers have craved for years, and none wants to slow its momentum."

Unlike the hyped embryonic stem cell research, adult stem cell research is already paying dividends. According to Michael Fumento, one of the nation's most skilled debunkers of junk science, "Over the horizon are so-called adult stem cells (ASCs), extracted from people of any age and from umbilical cords and placentas. Not only don't they carry the moral baggage of embryonic stem cells (ESCs), but research with them is much further along.

Fumento adds, "Unfortunately, embryonic stem cell researchers have so powerful a PR machine that many influential people don't even know there's an alternative."

Note to the media: Next time you write about the "family," remember both dad and me. It's our family too.

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