



Cloning for Missouri

‘At issue was scientific integrity, not religious fanaticism.’

THE ELECTIONS of 2006 were largely seen as a referendum on the policies of President George Bush, especially the military adventurism and looming failure in Iraq. Having learned from the defeat at the polls, the president accepted the resignation of his secretary of defense the following day. Perhaps that would stem the tide.

The war referendum was not lost on the people of my state, Missouri, although a more intense and possibly long-ranging battle was fought over the creating and harvesting of human embryonic stem cells. After months of a double-digit lead, the proposition, which in effect would guarantee the right to clone human embryos and competitively pay women for their eggs, won by only a hair. The question remained, however, whether the opponents of this attempt to amend the Missouri state constitution, would learn from their defeat as well as the president seems to have learned from his.

The euphemistically named Coalition for Life-Saving Cures was the driving force behind the stem cell proposition. Of its \$28 million war chest, \$24 million was donated by the Stowers Institute for Medical Research, established by a Kansas City couple whose initial gift of \$50 million and subsequent gifts have ballooned into a \$2 billion endowment. The \$24 million was the fuel that drove the campaign to constitutionally protect therapeutic cloning.

The first strategic move was a clever and sometimes dishonest use of language. Advertised variations of the phrase “life-saving scientific cures through stem cells” were embedded over and over in the

minds of voters. Having seized control of the language, advocates of the proposal could portray any opponents as being against “saving cures,” science and stem cell research. This was alleged to be the stance of faith groups and various bishops, who were more interested in reproduction than in helping sufferers. These “faith groups” were outmaneuvered, moreover, by positioning the “pro-life” former Republican senator and Episcopal priest John Danforth as a prominent spokesman for the measure.

A less honest move was the invention of a new meaning for the term “cloning.” Despite universal scientific agreement that somatic cell nuclear transfer is cloning, the initiative announced that cloning occurs only when you implant an embryo in a woman’s uterus for the purpose of giving birth. Thus, even an eight-week-old fetus would not be a “clone” if you abort it in an effort to harvest its cells.

The most effective advertisement of the campaign, however, featured Michael J. Fox, who suffers from Parkinson’s disease, endorsing the initiative and the successful Democratic candidate for senator. This might have had only a small impact but for the buffoonery of Rush Limbaugh, his arms flailing as if mocking Fox, saying Fox was either off his medications or acting. The ad, with the Limbaugh tape, was aired nationally for days of free publicity, the apex being an uncommonly long interview (split in two by a commercial) with Katie Couric and her seven million viewers of the “CBS Evening News.” (Google offers you a half-million sites if you search using the words Couric and Fox.) Perhaps it was poetic justice that the Republicans Limbaugh and Danforth would be instrumental in Missouri’s loss of its Republican senator.

There were impressive efforts to

oppose the embryonic stem sell proposition, especially those mounted by the Missouri Roundtable for Life and Vitae Caring Foundation; but these could not overcome the embedded association that opposition to the bill was motivated by sectarian faith, hostility to science and Limbaugh-like insensitivity to human disability.

The most powerful opposition to the proposition came from the Coalition of Americans for Research Ethics (www.stemcellresearch.org) in a full-page “open letter to the people of Missouri from experts in science, medicine, law and ethics on the cloning provisions of Missouri’s Amendment 2” that appeared in *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Twenty-seven of the 35 signers were physicians and scientists, unmasking the “misleading and deceptive” denial that this is cloning. In the same newspaper edition, a smaller yet more courageous advertisement appeared. It was signed by 11 faculty members of Washington University’s school of medicine. (The university has a Danforth Campus, named after its 13th chancellor, brother of the senator.) Among other things, the letter warns against our surrendering any right to regulate cloning, the economic exploitation of women’s eggs, the creation of false hopes and the ignoring of manifold successes already achieved in adult stem cell therapies.

Resistance to the Missouri Stem Cell Initiative was primarily an issue of truth, not faith. It was about scientific integrity, not religious fanaticism.

The issue of cloning indeed impinges upon people of faith and their convictions about the beginnings of human life. But if we are to argue our case in the public square, our case cannot be made by fiat or assertion. We must use evidence and scientific data to make our judgments warranted. Moreover we must demonstrate our own commitment to ethical research that makes healing possible.

In short, we must find our own philanthropists with enough generosity and vision, not to buy a mere election, but to endow a world-class center for adult and umbilical cord stem cell therapy. The question is, Are there any out there?

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