



# The NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL of MEDICINE

**Audio Interview: Expanding Federal Funding for Embryonic Stem-Cell Research, with Senator Orrin G. Hatch. N Engl J Med 2007;356:e18.**

## Transcript

**Rachel Gotbaum:** I'm Rachel Gotbaum with the *New England Journal of Medicine*. On Wednesday, April 11th, the U.S. Senate passed a bill that would loosen restrictions on federal funding of stem-cell research. I'm speaking with Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah. He was one of numerous Republicans who supported this bill.

You're a pro-life Republican.

**Orrin Hatch:** That's right.

**RG:** You come from a politically conservative state. How did you come to support stem-cell research. What happened?

**OH:** Well, I have to admit that it was a very, very difficult process for me because I met with religious leaders on both sides of the abortion issue. I met with ethicists on both sides. I met with scientists on both sides, doctors on both sides, political people on both sides. I have to tell you I really believe that it was absolutely correct for me to support embryonic stem-cell research, and I believe that being pro-life is more than just caring for the unborn — it's caring for the living as well. And this type of research is the most promising research in the history of the planet, and it ought to be followed through, and it ought to be followed through with the highest moral and ethical standards that we can possibly come up with. And the way to do that is to have NIH fully involved.

**RG:** Did something happen? Did a case come up? What was the turning point?

**OH:** Well, there was a case. I can't say that it was the only reason why my mind was changed, but there was a little Utah boy — he was 4 years of age — who was brought to me. His name was Cody Anderson. He was 4 years of age, and you can imagine the horror his family had when they found out that he had exactly the same virulent diabetic condition that his grandfather had, who died at the premature age of 47 due to complications of diabetes after a series of something like 27 painful and debilitating and ultimately unsuccessful operations. I can still remember that little exhausted boy falling peacefully asleep in his father's arms in my office as his family visited me in support of more funding for diabetes research. It dawned on me that we owe the best we can to these kids.

What if we could find a treatment and/or cure for virulent juvenile diabetes or for diabetes in general? That would save us trillions of dollars in health care costs over the years, plus a lot of lives, and give people a better quality of life who suffer from these type of problems. And I'd say that was part of the reason, certainly.

And then I met with a series of Nobel laureates. And I'm aware of some 40 Nobel laureates who share this view on the potential of embryonic stem-cell research. I met with a number of the leading scientists, and they all conveyed an urgent sense that this new avenue of science is very, very important, and worth the effort to address the — you know — the attendant policy, ethical, and political challenges.

**RG:** How did you move through the ethical issues as a pro-life, anti-abortion person yourself?

**OH:** Well, for the life of me, I cannot understand how anybody can argue that we should destroy 7000 to — or cast aside — 7000 to 20,000 in vitro fertilized eggs a year as hospital waste and thus kill them, and that that is a pro-life position. And not use them for the benefit of mankind. Especially little boys like Cody Anderson, or any number of other people throughout our society. With federal government help from NIH and a proper administration, we may be able to solve many of the health care problems of mankind and at the same time save trillions of dollars while doing ethical research.

**RG:** Have you met with President Bush and discussed your views and heard his views on this?

**OH:** Well, he knows my views, and I know how sincere he is. Now I told the White House after the first time that we passed the embryonic stem-cell research bill that look, if you're concerned about the destruction of the emb — the so-called, quote — destruction — unquote, of the embryo — if you're so concerned about that, then we have about 300 to 400 existing new embryonic stem-cell lines created by the private sector. Why don't you let NIH partner with those private-sector companies that are willing to partner with them in the development of those existing embryonic stem-cell lines, because that way you would not have had the government participate in this so-called, quote — destruction — unquote. But of course, the answer was, well, that would be encouraging more stem-cell lines to be done and the destruction of human life.

But I really don't believe that the President has been given good advice on this. I believe the advice he has been given is political and not scientific. And I don't believe he has had the time to really study it as I have, as someone who has helped leading the fight up here. But — let's be honest about it — he believes that they've taken a principled position. And from their viewpoint, they have.

**RG:** The President has promised to veto this bill.

**OH:** Well, he will.

**RG:** Are there any prospects for an override, in your view?

**OH:** Well, I think we were one vote away. Now I have to, I have to chat politically for a minute. I begged my Democrat colleagues to not politicize this issue in the last election. They did. They just couldn't help themselves. I said I know of at least one vote that resented the politicization of the issue that we probably would have had, which would have given us 67 votes. And I believe there may have been others who just got resentful when they saw the politicization of it.

Look, it's no secret, Michael J. Fox went up and down the land for a variety of Democratic candidates making this an issue. Now, I happen to like Michael J. Fox. I understand his anxiety about this with the malady that he has — the Parkinson's disease that he has. And I think he meant to be bipartisan, but in the process, I think helped to defeat a man who would have been with us, and that's Jim Talent of Missouri. I think I could have gotten to Jim Talent. I was talking to him all the time, and he was very concerned about it. But at that point in the election process pretty well had to stand with his prior conviction, but he was open to it. I think we had a reasonable chance to get him. But not just Jim Talent. There were some others, too, and then there — I've had some people come to me and say I wish they hadn't politicized this, I don't think I can vote for it now.

**RG:** Let's talk a little bit about therapeutic cloning. You're a supporter of therapeutic cloning. Where are we with this bill that you've coauthored with Senator Dianne Feinstein of California?

**OH:** Well, that bill doesn't have a chance right now. I think if we actually did the in vitro fertilization bill that would allow those cells to be used — rather than cast aside and killed — but used for research to help current suffering people, and if that research does go forward and becomes effective research, then I think there will be a hue and a cry to do the regenerative medicine research that we've been talking about — some call it therapeutic cloning. But I think we're a far cry from being able to get that type of bill through.

**RG:** So what is the outlook, given the momentum of this stem-cell research initiative? What will it take to make it law, in your view?

**OH:** Well, we're going to win. I mean, we're gradually just making the case, but unfortunately we're 7 years behind where we would be in research had we not had this failure to win. It's going to probably take another Congress to be able to really win on this issue.

**RG:** Orrin Hatch is a Republican senator from Utah.