

## [On Stem Cell Research](#)

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IN MY OPINION

## On Stem Cell Research

There's great potential, but consider the source

dr. valavandan manickavel

A lot of people are talking about stem cell research these days. Some say it may provide a cure for all ailments. This seems almost too good to be true. Maybe it is. If current stem cell research yields even some of the cures speculated, health care--as we understand it--could drastically change, and a new world of medicine thus created would beg answers to at least two important ethical questions.

A stem cell is unspecialized and usually embryonic. It is a master cell of sorts and has the wonderful potential of growing into just about any kind of cell, tissue, organ or organism. Even as I am writing this article, stem cell researchers are striving to provide cures for ailments previously considered untreatable, like Alzheimer's disease and serious spinal injury.

Most sickness can be attributed to diseased organs, tissues or cells. These abnormal conditions may arise for a variety of reasons, including old age, unhealthy dietary habits and alcohol or drug abuse. However, some ailments in children are genetic. They are provoked by "defective genes " passed on by their parents.

Implanting stem cells is a treatment system that is similar to transplantation, but without surgery. Defective or diseased cells are replaced with stem cells. These stem cells then multiply as necessary in a variety of directions to eventually restore normal bodily function. In people with Parkinson's disease, for instance, stem cells

can synthesize dopamine. In diabetes patients, they can make insulin.

Stem cells may be obtained in three ways. They can be harvested from aborted fetuses. They may be developed from the cultivation of excess male and female gametes produced by in-vitro fertilization but not used in implantation. Or they may come from other stem cells cultivated specifically for the purpose of creating more stem cells.

One ethical question with regard to this research has to do with obtaining stem cells from aborted fetuses. Here we must ask: "Is a fetus a person?" Hindus believe that it is, for they contend that life begins at conception. Yet Hindus do permit abortion, when it is preformed to save the life of the mother. These are not views held by every Hindu on this complicated issue. The debate continues.

In a diplomatic move to appease both stem cell research scientists and pro-life antagonists intent upon stopping stem cell research, President Bush recently imposed restrictions in the US on human embryonic stem-cell research, stating that only about 60 cell lineages would be available for research. Pro-lifers are happy to have been heard and researchers are moderately content to at least be able to proceed with their work in the security of legal protection.

There is another ethical question, less discussed but just as important. Most stem cell research is done by private biological and pharmaceutical companies that are motivated, at least in part, by the potential of great financial gain. The price of their product as it first comes onto the market will most certainly be high to cover expenses and provide a profit. Only the rich will be able to pay. What about the poor?

Hindus join the followers of most religions of the world in condoning the saving of lives--even at great sacrifice--but the precise extent of that sacrifice is a line that is hard to draw. The Singapore Hindu Endowment Board in their written response on this issue for the Singapore Bioethics Advisory Committee recently offered a typically ambiguous statement. "There is no non-acceptance to the use of these [stem] cells to protect human life and to advance life by curing disease, " they said. Later they added: "Killing a fetus is a sinful act."