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Speakout: Making sense of science in the politics of the stem-cell debate

By Roger A. Pielke
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If you want to liven up conversation at a dinner party, ask the following question: How much money would you take for your pinkie toe? The exchange would be completely pain-free and the money would be yours free and clear with no further obligations. Based on my limited and unscientific asking of this question, it seems that people respond according to whether they fall into one of two categories.

In the first category are the Stalwarts who will keep their pinkie toe no matter the price, whether \$1,000 or \$1 billion. Stalwarts cite a wide variety of reasons for their position, ranging from the moral (it's wrong) and aesthetic (it'll disfigure me) to the practical (what about my tennis game?).

In the second category are the Dealers. These folks will part with their pinkie toe, but only if they perceive that the benefits exceed the costs.

Included in this category is Ronnie Lott, a former professional football player with the San Francisco 49ers, who in 1985 had the end of his injured pinkie toe cut off so that he could play in a playoff game.

Most Dealers have a somewhat different benefit-cost calculus than Lott, but nonetheless they all have their price.

Of course, there is no right answer to this question; reasonable people will disagree with one another, even as we judge other people's decisions to be unreasonable.

Both Dealers and Stalwarts are present in the current debate over embryonic stem cells and recognizing their differences can help us to make sense of the science and politics of the stem-cell debate.

The issue of stem cells is controversial because - just as their name implies - embryonic stem cells come from human embryos, which may have been cloned for research purposes. Predictably, the use of embryos which are destroyed in the process of embryonic stem-cell research has caught the attention of the anti-abortion/abortion rights crowd, who count among their ranks President George W. Bush.

In October 2001, President Bush announced a policy that would prohibit the destruction of any embryo for stem-cell research, and limited scientists to research on existing lines. On the issue of stem cells President Bush is a Stalwart: even as he recognizes that there may be potential benefits from embryonic stem-cell research, he refuses to compromise his principles to realize those benefits, no matter how large they may be.

By contrast Sen. John Kerry is a Dealer. In a speech earlier this summer in Denver, Kerry argued, "By supporting stem-cell therapy, we have the possibility to control the future. Not only can we reduce the economic cost of health care, we can reduce the emotional and social cost of families." Kerry believes that the potential benefits of

embryonic stem-cell research justify going forward with research.

Confusion about the role of science in the stem-cell debate arises when Dealers and Stalwarts fail to understand each other's perspective. For example, 48 Nobel laureates have endorsed Kerry, in part because they believe that the Bush administration has placed "unwarranted restrictions on stem-cell research" that are impeding medical advances.

The laureates seem to assume that everyone is a Dealer. So too does Kerry, who made a case for stem-cell research in a June radio address: "Believe it or not, there was a time when some questioned the morality of heart transplants." In other words, it is only a matter of time before everyone recognizes that the benefits of stem-cell research outweigh any costs.

It doesn't seem that President Bush will come to such a conclusion anytime soon. In his August 2001 address to the nation on stem-cell research, the president justified his decision to limit research to then-available stem-cell lines as follows: "My position on these issues is shaped by deeply held beliefs. I'm a strong supporter of science and technology, and believe they have the potential for incredible good - to improve lives, to save life, to conquer disease. Research offers hope that millions of our loved ones may be cured of a disease and rid of their suffering. I have friends whose children suffer from juvenile diabetes.

"Nancy Reagan has written me about President Reagan's struggle with Alzheimer's. My own family has confronted the tragedy of childhood leukemia. And, like all Americans, I have great hope for cures. I also believe human life is a sacred gift from our Creator."

For Dealers, stem cells are a scientific issue because estimation of the potential benefits of stem-cell research depends upon understanding and evaluating assertions made by scientists. But for stem-cell Stalwarts the issue is not at all a scientific issue, because no matter what scientists say about potential benefits, Stalwarts won't change their position.

The reality is that the issue of embryonic stem cells has scientific and nonscientific elements, but without a doubt, the issue is also highly political. How you come to the issue will depend on whether you are a Dealer or a Stalwart on this issue.

Now, how much for that toe?

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