

Putting science back in public policy

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Science works in fits and starts — sometimes so slowly that progress seems like an illusion and at other times so quickly we can barely keep up.

By scientific standards, then, federal funding restrictions for embryonic stem cell research were a blip on the radar screen. President Barack Obama's decision to lift them wasn't a surprise, but it was an important step forward.

Federal funding is no guarantee that embryonic stem cell research will provide hoped-for cures to dreaded diseases like diabetes, let alone guarantee that any cures might come soon.

But the executive order that Obama signed on Monday will clear away bureaucratic and procedural hurdles that have hampered that research. It provides an important new source of funding.

Perhaps most important, it signals a new commitment to science ideals, free inquiry and open debate in American public policy.

Many doctors believe embryonic stem cell research is among the most promising avenues of scientific inquiry. That's because embryonic stem cells are "pluripotent" — they can develop into any type of cell.

Human embryonic stem cells were first isolated in 1998, just yesterday in scientific terms. But researchers have already made major advances in understanding how they work.

That's true even though for the last eight years federal funding for research has been extremely limited. An executive order signed by President George W. Bush in August 2001 restricted it to a handful of stem cell lines then in existence.

Since then, hundreds more stem cell lines have been developed with private funding. Some contain defects for specific diseases, which make them invaluable in helping to understand how illness develops and how it might be countered.

The lack of federal funding was bad enough. But equally harmful was a complex set of accounting

restrictions that required separate labs to be built and separate staffs to be maintained to perform embryonic stem cell research with private funding.

Opponents of embryonic stem cell research argue that adult stem cells are more promising. They were first isolated nearly a half-century ago and now are used for some medical treatments.

In late 2007, scientists announced advances in adult stem cell research. They were able to get those cells to "differentiate" to develop into specialized cells.

But just as with embryonic stem cells, basic questions remain about the mechanism for that development, how to trigger and control it. Those questions demonstrate the importance of continuing research with both adult and embryonic stem cells.

In signing his executive order this week, Obama signaled a new effort to insulate scientific research and decision-making from political considerations. That's crucial for a society, like ours, that prides itself on openness and innovation.

As important as restoring of any particular kind of research might be, the larger achievement is Obama's restoration of scientific ideals.

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