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Obama opens up stem cell work, science inquiries

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WASHINGTON -- From tiny embryonic cells to the large-scale physics of global warming, President Barack Obama urged researchers on Monday to follow science and not ideology as he abolished contentious Bush-era restraints on stem-cell research. "Our government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values," Obama declared as he signed documents changing U.S. science policy and removing what some researchers have said were shackles on their work.

"It is about ensuring that scientific data is never distorted or concealed to serve a political agenda _ and that we make scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology," Obama said.

Researchers said the new president's message was clear: Science, which once propelled men to the moon, again matters in American life.

Opponents saw it differently: a defeat for morality in the most basic questions of life and death.

"The action by the president today will, in effect, allow scientists to create their own guidelines without proper moral restraints," Family Research Council President Tony Perkins said.

In a crowded ornate East Room, there were more scientists in the White House than Alan Leshner, CEO of the American Association for the Advancement of Science had seen in his 30 years in Washington. "More happy scientists than I've seen," he added.

The most immediate effect will allow federally funded researchers to use hundreds of new embryonic stem cell lines for promising, but still long-range research in hopes of creating better treatments, possibly even cures, for conditions ranging from diabetes to paralysis. Until now, those researchers had to limit themselves to just 21 stem cell lines created before August 2001, when President George W. Bush limited funding because of "fundamental questions about the beginnings of life and the ends of science."

Science, politics and religion have long intertwined and conflicted with each other. In his actions Monday, especially with the stem cell decision, Obama is emphasizing more the science than the religion, when compared with his predecessor, science policy experts say. But they acknowledged politics is still involved.

Don't expect stem cell cures or treatments anytime soon. One company this summer will begin the world's first study of a treatment using human embryonic stem cells, in people who recently suffered spinal cord injuries. Research institutions on Monday were gearing up to ask for more freely flowing federal money, and the National Institutes of Health was creating guidelines on how to hand it out and include ethical constraints. It will be months before the stem cell money flows; the average NIH stem cell grant is \$1.5 million spread out over four years.

Scientists focused on a new sense of freedom.

"I think patients everywhere will be cheering us on, imploring us to work faster, harder and with all of our ability to find new treatments," said Harvard Stem Cell Institute co-director Doug Melton, father of two children with Type I diabetes who could possibly be treated with stem cells. "On a personal level, it is an enormous relief and a time for celebration. ... Science thrives when there is an open and collaborative exchange, not when there are artificial barriers, silos, constructed by the government."

Opponents framed their opposition mostly, but not exclusively, on moral grounds and the scientifically contested claims that adult stem cells work just as well.

Said Wendy Wright, president of Concerned Women for America: "President Obama's order places the worst kind of politics above ethics. Politics driven by hype makes overblown promises, fuels the desperation of the suffering and financially benefits those seeking to strip morality from science."

In Congress, Reps. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., and Mike Castle, R-Del., said they would seek a quick vote on legislation to codify Obama's order in federal law, after failing twice in the past to overturn Bush's restrictions. DeGette said she doesn't want stem cell research to become "a pingpong ball going back and forth between administrations."

But Rep. Tom Price, R-Ga., chairman of the Republican study committee, said the president's new policy would "force taxpayers to subsidize research that will destroy human embryos." De Gette and Castle said their legislation tries to minimize destruction of embryos.

Stem cells are typically derived from fertility clinic surplus, destined for destruction.

Obama also said the stem cell policy is designed so that it "never opens the door to the use of cloning for human reproduction." Such cloning, he said, "is dangerous, profoundly wrong, and has no place in our society or any society."

In addition to the stem cell order, Obama issued a memo designed to ensure openness about scientific research and give whistleblower protection to scientists.

Promoting science "is about letting scientists like those here today do their jobs, free from manipulation or coercion, and listening to what they tell us, even when it's inconvenient _ especially when it's inconvenient," Obama said.

Science and politics often conflict, said Granger Morgan, professor of engineering and public policy at Carnegie Mellon University and a former science advisory board chairman for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency _ perhaps illustrated no more wildly than in 1897 when the Indiana legislature attempted to change the mathematical concept of pi to 3.2. Science should provide the facts that politicians use for their decisions, Morgan and Leshner said.

Many scientists and environmental activists complained that the Bush administration had censored and marginalized science. That's a perception that Bush science adviser John Marburger repeatedly called untrue and unfair, as he addressed a series of occurrences that troubled critics.

In 2006, the White House edited out congressional testimony about public health effects of global warming by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Julie Gerberding. A 2003 EPA global warming document was edited by nonscientists at the White House. A NASA political appointee tried _ and failed _ to silence the agency's top climate scientist.

Former Surgeon General Richard Carmona resigned in 2006, complaining about White House interference on

global health issues: "The problem with this approach is that in public health, as in democracy, there is nothing worse than ignoring science or marginalizing the voice of science for reasons driven by changing political winds."

Obama advisers contend that all has changed. The government has already put on hold rules about scientific input on endangered species, reinstating advice that had been excised during the Bush administration.

Public policy must "be guided by sound scientific advice," said Dr. Harold Varmus, the Nobel Prize-winning co-chairman of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. The new memo Obama signed is "mainly a way of trying to prevent tampering with any advice," Varmus told MSNBC.

Associated Press writers Luran Neergaard, Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Philip Elliott contributed to this report.

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