



Obama allows tax dollars to fund embryonic stem cell research

By PHILIP ELLIOTT • Associated Press • March 9, 2009

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama said Monday he is allowing federal taxpayer dollars to fund significantly broader research on embryonic stem cells because “medical miracles do not happen simply by accident,” and promised his administration would make up for the ground lost under his predecessor.

Fulfilling a campaign promise, Obama signed an executive order expected to set in motion increased research that supporters believe could uncover cures for serious ailments from diabetes to paralysis. Obama’s action, before a packed East Room audience, reverses former President George W. Bush’s policy on stem cell research by undoing a 2001 directive that banned federal funding for research into stem lines created after that date.

Bush limited the use of taxpayer money to only the 21 stem cell lines that had been produced before his decision. He argued he was defending human life because days-old embryos — although typically from fertility clinics and already destined for destruction — are destroyed to create the stem cell lines.

The Obama order reverses that without addressing a separate legislative ban, which precludes any federal money paying for the development of stem cell lines.

The legislation, however, does not prevent funds for research on those lines created without federal funding.

Researchers say the newer lines created with private money during the period of the Bush ban are healthier and better suited to creating treatment for diseases. Embryonic stem cells are master cells that can morph into any cell of the body.

Scientists hope to harness them so they can create replacement tissues to treat a variety of diseases — such as new insulin-producing cells for diabetics, cells that could help those with Parkinson’s disease or maybe even Alzheimer’s, or new nerve connections to restore movement after spinal injury.

Obama called his decision a “difficult and delicate balance,” an understatement of the intense emotions generated on both sides of the long, contentious debate.

He said he came down on the side of the “majority of Americans” who support increased federal funding for the research, both because strict oversight would prevent problems and because of the great and lifesaving potential it holds.

“Rather than furthering discovery, our government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values,” Obama said, according to a text of his prepared remarks released in advance by the White House. “In this case, I believe the two are not inconsistent. As a person of faith, I believe we are called to care for each other and work to ease human suffering. I believe we have been given the capacity and will to pursue this research and the humanity and conscience to do so responsibly.”