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Some Stem Cell Research Limits Lifted

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WASHINGTON — The Obama administration announced Friday that it planned to lift some but not all federal financing restrictions on human embryonic stem cell research, drawing criticism both from abortion opponents and from scientists who had expected a more liberal policy.

Guidelines proposed by the National Institutes of Health to carry out an order made last month by President Obama would allow research with federal financing only on stem cells derived from surplus embryos at fertility clinics. The money would still be prohibited for stem cell lines created solely for research purposes and for embryos created through a technique known as therapeutic cloning.

During the campaign last year, Mr. Obama said he supported “therapeutic cloning of stem cells,” a policy his administration rejected Friday. A White House spokesman, Reid Cherlin, said the president “directed N.I.H. to formulate the best method for moving forward with stem cell research, both ethically and scientifically,” in an independent process.

Many scientists praised the new guidelines as an expected compromise.

“I think it’s a big step forward,” said Richard O. Hynes, a cancer researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “although there are aspects of stem cell research that will still be outside federal funding.”

Others called the proposed rules a sellout.

“I’m disappointed,” said Dr. Irving Weissman, the director of the Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine Institute at Stanford. Dr. Weissman accused the health institutes of “putting this ideological barrier in the way” of treating disease.

Abortion opponents predicted that the administration would soon embrace less restrictive stem cell policies.

“This is clearly part of an incremental strategy to desensitize the public to the concept of killing human embryos for research purposes,” said Douglas Johnson of the National Right to Life Committee.

The acting director of the health institutes, Dr. Raynard S. Kington, said that in writing the guidelines, officials had taken into account ethical considerations and “broad public support” for the use of discarded embryos from fertility clinics.

“As science changes,” Dr. Kington said, “we will take note of that and, when appropriate, reconsider the guidelines.”

Sitting on more than \$10 billion in stimulus money, health institute officials have been eager to expand financing for stem cell research. Under restrictions put in place by President George W. Bush, just 21 stem cell lines have been eligible for federal financing. But researchers using private money have created more than 700 stem cell lines, some with specific diseases or mutations, many of which may now be eligible for federal financing.

Some scientists said new rules requiring that donors be informed of all options could render too many new cell lines ineligible. And the rules could make ineligible for future federal financing even some cell lines approved by Mr. Bush.

Dr. George Q. Daley, the director of the stem cell transplantation program at Children’s Hospital Boston, said his team had used private financing to create 15 stem cell lines from poor-quality embryos that clinicians had told couples they should discard. Not all couples may have been told that they could donate the weakened embryos to other couples, a requirement under the new guidelines.

“My major concern,” Dr. Daley said, “is grandfathering all those medically important lines” made under less stringent consent policies, including some approved by Mr. Bush.

The announcement on Friday is likely to kick off a rush of applications from scientists eager for federal support for stem cell research. The health institutes have approved 20 such proposals for financing, although the projects have been delayed until the stem cell guideline is finalized.

In fiscal year 2008, the health institutes financed 260 research projects, at a cost of \$88 million, that involved stem cell lines approved by Mr. Bush.

“In a relatively short period of time, we’re likely to greatly increase the number of stem cell lines eligible for federal funding,” Dr. Kington said. “Ultimately, this will have a significant impact on human health and disease.”

The new guidelines will be published next week in the Federal Register, and the health institutes then will accept comments for 30 days. The rules are to be final by July 7.

Some in Congress have promised to introduce legislation that would allow financing of more stem cell lines. Representative Diana DeGette, Democrat of Colorado, said in a statement that the proposed legislation would “promote all forms of ethical stem cell research.” A statement from Representative Michael N. Castle, Republican of Delaware, said there was “opportunity for more expansive guidelines.”

Staff members for both lawmakers said they could not describe details of the legislation or whether it would seek to legalize federal financing of research using embryos created by therapeutic cloning.

Mr. Johnson of the National Right to Life Committee said the DeGette and Castle legislation would almost certainly undermine the few restrictions left in place by Mr. Obama.

Many scientists believe that the development of matched organs for transplantation would be possible only with therapeutic cloning or somatic cell nuclear transfer, a process by which genetic material from a patient is placed in the nucleus of an egg to produce embryonic stem cells that are an identical genetic match.

“You can’t even apply for funding now if you have a cell line derived by somatic cell nuclear transfer that faithfully reproduces, say, juvenile diabetes,” Dr. Weissman said.

But Dr. Kington said this cell transfer process had never been successfully carried out in human cells. And other scientists have suggested that if scientists create 1,000 or more genetically distinct stem cell lines, organs could be grown that would be a close enough genetic match to avoid rejection by patients’ immune systems.