



THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

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COVID-19 Vaccines: Promote Life and Health without Undermining Human Dignity April 8, 2020

The National Catholic Bioethics Center supports and encourages the rapid development of an effective, safe, and widely available vaccine to combat COVID-19. However, even a pandemic does not justify forgetting or violating the fundamental moral principles that guide ethical action: human life is sacred and should never be exploited. As the bishop chairmen of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops aptly note in their [statement on rationing](#), “Every crisis produces fear, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. However, this is not a time to sideline our ethical and moral principles. It is a time to uphold them ever more strongly, for they will critically assist us in steering through these trying times.”

Calling to mind the teachings of the Catholic Church in the 2008 instruction [Dignitas personae](#), the Center firmly opposes the plans of organizations and researchers to use cell lines derived from elective abortions—such as HEK-293 and PER-C6—to develop a vaccine against COVID-19, and calls on all researchers to find alternatives to such cell lines. The use of the cell lines cannot be justified by the historical separation that exists between the deliberate abortions that gave rise to the lines and the current decisions of researchers to continue to use this biological material. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith made this clear:

Therefore, it needs to be stated that there is a duty to refuse to use such “biological material” even when there is no close connection between the researcher and the actions of those who performed ... [the abortion]. This duty springs from the necessity to *remove oneself*, within the area of one’s own research, *from a gravely unjust legal situation and to affirm with clarity the value of human life*. (*Dignitas personae* n. 35, emphasis original)

In addition, the use of these cell lines, even for the laudable purpose of a COVID-19 vaccine, is a cause of serious theological scandal. Appealing to good aims and an “urgent need” will foster the deeper penetration of unethical research and development into medicine, politics, law, and culture. *Dignitas personae* warns against this: “Any appearance of acceptance would in fact contribute to the growing indifference to, if not the approval of, such actions in certain medical and political circles” (*DP*, n. 35).

Praise God, there are numerous efforts underway to develop a COVID-19 vaccine. We are aware of about ten. At the moment, it appears that three or four of these involve the use of cell lines from aborted fetuses. We encourage support for those research projects and organizations that are working toward a COVID-19 vaccine without recourse to abortion-derived cell lines, such as Sanofi and Inovio. Of particular note is the [John Paul II Medical Research Institute](#), an organization that is not only developing two COVID-19 vaccines, but aims to end the use of cell lines derived from abortion in medical research and bio-manufacturing through the creation of alternative, “immortalized” human adult stem cell lines.

For questions about when it might be legitimate to utilize vaccines of illicit origin, see the NCBC’s [FAQ on the Use of Vaccines](#).