

Canceling the NIH Research Ethics Advisory Board

As a bioethicist I find it unconscionable and astonishing that ethics review of significant scientific research projects is seen as unnecessary by officials at the highest levels in our country. The [National Institutes of Health](#) (NIH) recently announced a reversal of the 2019 decision that all research applications for NIH grants and contracts that call for the use of human fetal tissue from elective abortions be reviewed by a special Ethics Advisory Board. The change is official. The NIH will simply disband this vital review board.

They did retain a reminder that there needs to be informed consent from the “donor” for any NIH-funded research using fetal tissue — and here indeed is the heart of this ethics issue. The dead preborn child cannot give consent, so this is sought from the mother who chose the abortion. This cannot be done ethically. A parent can only give medical consent for a son or daughter validly when acting in the best interests of their offspring. If they are choosing to kill that child, they forfeit any claim to being that baby’s protector and guardian.

Planned Parenthood and others often misleadingly affirm that research using tissue from abortions has helped find cures for Parkinsons, Alzheimers, AIDS, and other illnesses. So far, there are in fact no scientific cures for these diseases, but the promise of saving lives is dangled before women as an attempt to justify or show the positive benefit of killing preborn babies or human embryos that would “die anyway.” When examined closely this reasoning is appalling. How can it be good to kill and exploit innocent human beings by raiding their corpses for valuable organs and cells? The dehumanization of the intended victim must be complete for people not to immediately react with moral revulsion.

President [Bill Clinton](#) opened the floodgates of unethical research by ending a ban on federal funding for scientific research using fetal tissue obtained through abortions in 1993. President [Barack Obama](#) lifted President George W. Bush’s restrictions on research using human embryonic stem cells in 2009. Now President [Joe Biden](#) is quickly carrying out his campaign promises to pro-abortion forces by reversing President Donald Trump’s requirement for a strict ethics review of government funded scientific research linked to fetal organs and tissues taken after abortions.

I am struck by how brazen the liberal side is on this matter. They could simply have allowed the NIH Ethics Advisory Board to continue and then populated it with people who would rubber stamp any and all research proposals involving tissue from aborted babies, but they did not. Instead, they assert the radical proposition that there is no real potential for unethical research using fetal tissue as long as consent has been obtained from the mother *after* she has decided to abort her child. They also tell scientists to conduct research in accord with applicable federal, state, or local laws and regulations. In a nod to the undercover exposé of Planned Parenthood exchanging money for fetal body parts, the NIH also reminds scientists they are prohibited from paying “valuable consideration” for tissue from aborted babies. This means they can pay a fee, but it must reflect the costs of obtaining and preparing the specimen and shipping and not a “sale” that makes a profit. These are not sufficient safeguards.

Lack of meaningful ethics review of medical and scientific research in the past has led to terrible abuses. Bioethics exists in part as a discipline that puts a check on the very real dangers of science or medicine without conscience or ethical safeguards.

Sometimes the biggest lies are the hardest to counter. What can you say to a person who stubbornly maintains that the Moon is made of cheese? If one abandons the common ground of reason and objective facts, dialogue is useless. What happens when two sides simply talk past each other and do not share a minimum level of agreement on ethics? I am afraid fruitless dialogue devolves into the raw use of power. When there is no ethical check it is easy for “might to make right.” The leftist playbook seems to be increasingly skewed towards compelling people to act — and even forcing them to speak — in ways that violate their well-formed consciences and beliefs. Conservatives have also sinned in this area in the past. What is terribly disappointing is that what is severely condemned as a historical crime is openly embraced by some in the present. The ideologically motivated trampling on the rights of the opponents of these atrocities is a serious problem. There needs to be a robust debate that is not censored but rather grounded in mutual respect and charity.

The liberal decision to abolish a critical ethics advisory board is a symptom of a much wider problem. Preborn children have their very personhood denied by the most extreme pro-abortion ideologues. Those small human beings have no rights. That is the message they unabashedly proclaim. Scientific experimentation directly using their fetal organs and tissues poses no ethical problem, they say, as long as a proxy consent is obtained *pro forma*. The falsity of this assertion is so immense that one is left almost speechless.

Preborn children have a right to life, and they depend on us to speak for them. I was very pleased when one of our NCBC ethicists, Father Tad Pacholczyk, was chosen for the NIH Ethics Advisory Board in 2020. He strongly defended Catholic bioethical positions as part of that body. We did not expect President Biden’s administration to renew Fr. Tad’s mandate, but to abolish the ethics board entirely did come as a surprise. Completely abandoning ethics reviews in this most problematic area of science is a radically dangerous path indeed.