June 23, 2000

The Honorable Tom Harkin
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Harkin,

On behalf of the 10,000 scientists who belong to the American Society for Cell Biology, we write to express our opposition to Senator Robert Smith's (R-NH) amendment regarding fetal tissue research to the Labor Health & Human Services Appropriations bill. If passed, this amendment will almost certainly have a chilling effect on several very important and potentially life-saving areas of biomedical research.

Lawfully acquired fetal tissue continues to be vital in the search for potential therapies for Parkinson's disease, sudden infant death syndrome and many other devastating diseases. Because of this need, Congress previously made legal the use of federal funds for this potentially life-saving research, but with strict ethical oversight and clear prohibition of sale for profit of fetal tissue. Indeed, at a hearing of the House Commerce Committee on March 9, Members from both sides of the aisle expressed a strong commitment to fetal tissue research. However, some Members were concerned that tissue suppliers might be illegally profiting from the sale of fetal tissue. During this thorough and in-depth hearing, no evidence was produced to support the claim that fetal tissue is being sold for profit to biomedical researchers. In fact, one witness claiming to have first hand knowledge of such illegal activity was convincingly discredited.

In spite of the absence of any documentation of illegal fetal tissue sales, and the complete lack of any evidence at all that medical researchers use fetal tissue inappropriately, Senator Smith's amendment to the Labor HHS bill would restrict funds appropriated for the NIH that are used for the lawful acquisition of fetal tissue from previously induced abortions. Senator Smith may argue that this amendment would not restrict the use of federal funds for the acquisition of fetal tissue from ectopic pregnancies or miscarriages, but unfortunately such tissue is not sufficient for most biomedical research. Tissue from ectopic pregnancies or miscarriages is hard to obtain and often has genetic defects rendering the tissue unsuitable.
for medical research. Most disturbingly, the amendment clearly aims to hinder potentially life-saving research conducted by the researchers themselves, who are not even the subject of suspected abuses. All available evidence indicates that those who use fetal tissue in their research are scrupulous in following the letter and spirit of current law, in part because biomedical researchers are keenly aware of the great sensitivity around its use.

Fetal tissue is vital to the advancement of critical biomedical research. As the Human Genome Project nears completion, the knowledge we will gain offers great promise for clinical treatment of many diseases such as diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. The initial development of some of these new therapies will require research with legally-obtained fetal tissue. Those who wish to frustrate this research, either directly or through intimidation, should be held accountable to those whose lives depend on it.

Please oppose the Smith fetal tissue amendment to the Labor/HHS Appropriations bill.

Thank you for your ongoing dedication to medical research and your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,

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