

August 31, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

On behalf of the scientific, medical, and patient communities dedicated to advancing human health, we write to express ongoing concerns about the NIH Human Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board and its final report that would block funding for all but one research proposal seeking to use human fetal tissue. Given the unbalanced composition of the Ethics Advisory Board, we are concerned that the final report reflects a pre-determined objective that is impeding promising biomedical research that has the potential to save lives and reduce human suffering. Considering the medical and scientific significance of research using human fetal tissue, we urge you to use your authority under 42 U.S. Code § 289a–1(b) to reject the Ethics Advisory Board's recommendations to block specific research projects. Additionally, we ask that you immediately revoke the HHS policy restricting federal funding for biomedical research involving fetal tissue.

The evaluation process for publicly funded research must be insulated from politics and allowed to impartially identify promising research proposals that are ethically sound and scientifically and technically rigorous. This is fundamental to the meritocracy of American science that is envied around the world. In this case, each of the research proposals reviewed by the NIH Human Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board had been peer-reviewed and deemed meritorious with the potential to advance scientific discovery to improve human health.

[According to the Washington Post](#), five of the 15 members of the Ethics Advisory Board are affiliated with a single special interest group that advocates against using fetal tissue in research and that has no standing or expertise otherwise in the scientific community. We believe the lack of diverse perspectives and unbalanced composition of the Ethics Advisory Board prevented it from objectively evaluating most of the research proposals. The justification for the Ethics Advisory Board's recommendations were not adequately explained in the report, inhibiting public scrutiny of the rationale behind the recommendations. Additionally, the Ethics Advisory Board did not include a patient representative, a critical perspective for evaluating ethical considerations for research. In contrast, the review of fetal tissue research convened by President Ronald Reagan in 1988, led by a federal judge, included a diversity of perspectives from distinguished scientists and clinicians, patients, and multiple religious views. The Reagan panel ultimately [supported fetal tissue research by an 18 to 3 vote](#) and concluded in a detailed report that research using legally obtained human fetal tissue was ethical.

We are deeply concerned that the immediate and chilling effect of the Ethics Advisory Board's recommendations will limit the ethical use of an indispensable biomedical research tool and undermine medical advances in the United States. [As our coalition noted during HHS's fetal tissue review](#), human fetal tissue has unique and valuable properties that cannot be replaced by other research materials or animal models. Cells from fetal tissue are more flexible and less specialized than cells from adult tissue and can be more readily grown in culture. This is part of the reason why fetal tissue was crucial for the development of vaccines against polio, rubella, measles, chickenpox, adenovirus, rabies, and treatments for debilitating diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, cystic fibrosis, and hemophilia. Human fetal tissue remains necessary for ongoing research against viral diseases, understanding human development and its impact on disease, and research on potential treatments for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), spinal cord injury, and Parkinson's disease. [As our coalition noted in March](#), which was also noted in the Ethics Advisory Board Report, fetal tissue research may be the key to discoveries that could help end the COVID-19 pandemic.

As organizations representing institutions, scientists, clinicians, and patients driven by a desire to improve the health and well-being of all, we hope you will make the health and safety of all Americans a priority. We urge you to immediately reject the recommendations of the NIH Human Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board that would block funding for important research, and we ask you to revoke the HHS policy that restricts research using human fetal tissue. Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

AIDS Action Baltimore  
AIDS Foundation Chicago  
Alliance for Aging Research  
American Academy of HIV Medicine  
American Academy of Neurology  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Association for Anatomy  
American Association for the Advancement of Science  
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy  
American Brain Coalition  
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
American Institute of Biological Sciences  
American Society for Cell Biology  
American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM)  
American Society of Hematology  
American Thoracic Society  
Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities  
Association of American Medical Colleges  
Association of American Universities  
Association of Independent Research Institutes  
AVAC

Axis Advocacy  
Boston University  
Brown University  
Coalition for the Life Sciences  
Columbia University Irving Medical Center  
Council on Governmental Relations  
Duke University  
Equity Forward  
GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality  
Global Healthy Living Foundation  
Harvard University  
HealthHIV  
HIV Medicine Association  
HIV+Aging Research Project-Palm Springs  
Infectious Diseases Society of America  
International Foundation for Autoimmune & Autoinflammatory Arthritis (AiArthritis)  
International Society for Stem Cell Research  
ISCT, International Society for Cell & Gene Therapy  
Jacobs Institute of Women's Health  
Johns Hopkins University  
Mass General Brigham Incorporated  
Medical Students for Choice  
NASTAD  
National Alliance on Mental Illness  
NMAC  
Princeton  
Research!America  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine  
Society of Family Planning  
Society of Toxicology  
Stanford University  
State University of New York  
Stony Brook University  
Texans for Cures  
The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research  
The New York Stem Cell Foundation  
Treatment Action Group  
Tulane University  
UC San Francisco  
UCLA  
Union of Concerned Scientists  
United States People Living with HIV Caucus  
University at Buffalo  
University of California San Diego  
University of California System

University of California, Davis  
University of California, Irvine  
University of Massachusetts Medical School  
University of Oregon  
University of Pittsburgh  
University of Rochester  
University of Washington  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Weill Cornell Medicine  
Yale University