

March 15, 2016

To: Chairwoman Marsha Blackburn and Ranking Member Janice Schakowsky
Select Investigative Panel, House Energy and Commerce Committee

Dear Chairwoman Blackburn and Ranking Member Schakowsky:

On behalf of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the world's largest general scientific society, I write in response to the March 2 hearing on bioethics and fetal tissue research.

First, we at AAAS are troubled by the practice of issuing subpoenas that would risk making public the names of researchers, students and others involved in fetal tissue research. Fetal tissue research is legal and governed by strict ethical guidelines. Unfortunately, releasing the names of researchers is not just an issue of privacy, but safety.

In 1999, AAAS produced a report on the ethical dimensions of stem cell research, which included fetal cells.¹ The report notes that research utilizing fetal tissue has been the subject of ethical and legal debates for many years, and its regulation is codified in law (Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. 289) Section 498A). Public and private research on cells and tissue derived from all sources, including fetal tissue, should be conducted in order to advance scientific understanding and medical innovation. At the same time, it is imperative that this research be managed under carefully crafted regulatory and ethical guidelines that do not compromise the donation process or the conduct of science.

There is scant evidence to suggest that the decision to terminate a pregnancy bears on the decision to donate tissue – tissue that would otherwise be discarded – to research. The current law clearly separates a woman's decision to terminate a pregnancy from her consent to donate tissue, and it dictates that informed consent for the tissue donation may only be requested and obtained subsequent to that decision.

The vast majority of scientists care deeply about the ethical conduct of research, and there are several examples throughout history in which we, as a community of professionals, thoughtfully considered how best to conduct research that has ethical implications.

Fetal tissue research is a productive means for scientists to answer pressing questions about human health and development, and has contributed to a number of medical advances, including the development of vaccines for life-threatening diseases. Scientists continue to utilize this tissue source because they believe there are more advances to come.

We at AAAS have a longstanding history and expertise in issues of bioethics. We stand ready to work with you.

Sincerely,



Rush Holt
Chief Executive Officer of AAAS

¹ http://www.aaas.org/sites/default/files/content_files/Stem%20Cell%20Research%20and%20Applications%20Report.pdf