Survey: Nearly 70 percent of public supports embryonic stem cell research

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(PhysOrg.com) -- With both presidential candidates vowing to ease federal funding restrictions on embryonic stem cell research and important scientific advances reported widely in the media, a new University of Michigan study shows a majority of the public supports embryonic stem cell research.

Nearly 70 percent of respondents support "medical research that uses stem cells from human embryos," and a smaller majority, 54 percent, believed that the current lines of embryonic stem cells approved by President Bush for federal funding are not adequate for research needs.

These results parallel trends from repeated Virginia Commonwealth University polls measuring national public support for stem cell research. In 2002, VCU data showed that 35 percent favored "medical research that uses stem cells from human embryos" and 51 percent were opposed. Support has steadily increased, and the most recent survey, in 2007, showed 54 percent in favor and 39 percent opposed.

The U-M study asked 498 respondents to the monthly random digit dial Survey of Consumers carried out by the Survey Research Center about the sources and usefulness of stem cells and their support for stem cell research. A series of true-false questions about the size and developmental stage of the embryos used in research, state laws regulating the disposition of embryos created in fertility clinics, and the adequacy of stem cell lines approved by the federal government were also included. For a sample of this size, the confidence interval for

percentages around 50 percent is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

The results show that public misperceptions about stem cell research persist even though 69 percent of respondents reported reading or hearing about such research a great deal or some of the time. Respondents with at least a college degree tended to be somewhat better informed on the subject than those with less education.

"Although public support for embryonic stem cell research continues to increase, more information and education are needed about how these cells are derived and how they are used," said Eleanor Singer, research professor emerita at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, the world's largest academic survey and research organization.

A majority of respondents (54 percent) correctly identified the source of embryonic stem cells as leftover human embryos from fertility clinics, but more than 65 percent believed that stem cells from amniotic fluid and cord blood would produce the same scientific results as embryonic stem cells.

Embryonic stem cells can develop into any of the 200 cell types found in the human body. In contrast, stem cells taken from amniotic fluid and cord blood are already specialized "adult" or "tissue-specific" and can be used only for making some cells, such as blood-forming cells.

While most respondents correctly identified embryonic stem cells as derived from embryos left over from fertility clinics, nearly 40 percent thought aborted human fetuses could also be sources for such cells, and 39 percent thought cloned human embryos could be used for this purpose.

In fact, embryonic stem cells come from only one source – the inner cell mass from embryos produced in excess of those needed for fertility

treatments and donated for medical research.

About 49 percent of respondents knew that the embryos used for research were approximately as large as a period at the end of a printed sentence, and more than 61 percent knew that the embryos have no distinguishing features such as heart, brain or other human organ.

The public exhibited considerable confusion about laws governing the disposition of leftover embryos from fertility clinics. More than 44 percent believed, incorrectly, that under current law, research using embryos that would otherwise be destroyed is prohibited in all 50 states. In fact, only a few states, including Michigan, prohibit using leftover embryos for research.

A similar question, about whether fertility clinics can legally discard leftover embryos, was answered incorrectly by almost 43 percent. In all but one state, Louisiana, embryos may be discarded from fertility clinics as medical waste. In Michigan, leftover embryos are legally discarded.

U-M ISR September Surveys of Consumers: stem cells
umich.edu/news/index.html?Rele … 08/Oct08/stemsurveyq

Provided by University of Michigan