


MEMORANDUM

TO: Regent Johnson, Chair
Regent Brod, Chair, Audit Committee

FROM: Brian Herman, Vice President for Research 

DATE: October 14, 2015

RE: Fetal Tissue Research

Over the past two weeks, at the request of President Kaler, my office has undertaken a review of the work of University of Minnesota scientists who use fetal tissue in their research. Our researchers are doing important work that may lead to breakthroughs in diabetes, bone marrow transplantation, sepsis, morphine abuse, neurodegenerative diseases, HIV/AIDS, and recovery from treatment of leukemia and other cancers.

Fetal tissues are supplied by the California-based Advanced Bioscience Resources (ABR) and Stem Express. These suppliers obtain consent for the use of these tissues in medical research prior to their donation, and operate in accordance with federal guidelines that prohibit them from making a profit from procurement and provision of fetal tissue for their clients. The University of Minnesota has reaffirmed with ABR and Stem Express that their procurement practices are in accordance with all relevant statutes.

According to our review, current University policies do not comprehensively address the disposition of fetal tissue used in research. In order to ensure this tissue is treated with the utmost respect and dignity, the University of Minnesota Medical School Anatomical Bequest Program will immediately begin handling the procurement of fetal tissue and disposal after its use for research. The bequest program oversees the respectful interment or cremation of human tissues donated to the University of Minnesota for education and research purposes.

Research using fetal tissue, which has “long been an accepted part of the research world”¹ and which helped create breakthroughs such as the polio vaccine, holds great promise for new therapies to cure cancer, heart disease, bacterial and viral diseases, and asthma, to name just a few examples. Information derived from research using fetal tissue allows researchers to examine scientific questions that adult tissues, tissue from miscarriages or existing laboratory stem cell lines cannot address.

¹ Haberkorn, J., and Norman, B., “NIH, FDA tied to fetal-tissue firm,” *Politico*, Aug. 6, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/08/fetal-tissue-firm-has-federal-contracts-121066>

Research using fetal tissue has been a critical area of biomedical investigation for many decades; federal advisory committees under President Reagan endorsed their use. The federal government published guidelines for fetal tissue use in the 1990s and its agencies funds research using fetal tissue today. The University of Minnesota activity in this field of science aligns with those of many other top research universities in this country.²

We understand that research using fetal tissues may evoke strong feelings for some Minnesotans. We respect their point of view and recognize their passion around these matters. However, the University of Minnesota will continue to allow its researchers to use fetal tissue in their research as allowed under federal and state law and University of Minnesota policy.

² Association of American Medical Schools September 28, 2015 letter in support of support of fetal tissue research signed by 47 universities and medical centers, <https://www.aamc.org/download/444248/data/statementinsupportoffetaltissueresearch.pdf>