

Vanity vs. Moral Stem-Cell Sanity

Neocutis Claims It's Obeying 'Laws of God and Man'

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SAN FRANCISCO — Cells from fetuses have “unique properties” that aid in healing, boasts a Swiss biopharmaceutical firm, in response to complaints that it uses fetal cell lines in skin-care products.

A Christian watchdog group called Children of God for Life brought attention to the fact that the company, Neocutis, used the cell lines, derived from an abortion, in the products.

“It’s absolutely deplorable,” said the Tennessee group’s founder and executive director, Debi Vinnedge. “It’s not even for humanitarian reasons. They are exploiting the remains of a deliberately slaughtered baby for nothing other than vanity.”

Vinnedge usually concentrates her watchdog efforts on therapeutic rather than cosmetic products because manufacturers must make public the sources of the medical treatments but can and usually do keep private the ingredients of beauty treatments.

“But if someone asks, as they did in this case, about a beauty product, I’ll look into it,” she said. What she found when she checked the published research cited by Neocutis on its website to back up its claims about Bio-Gel, Journee, Bio-serum Intensive Treatment and Bio-Restorative Skin Cream was their derivation from the skin tissue of a 14-week-old fetus electively aborted at the University of Lausanne Hospital in Switzerland. “This is the first time we’ve found a cosmetics firm that would admit to using fetal material,” she said.

Neocutis is mounting a publicity campaign to counter Children of God for Life, defending the use of fetal tissue for product development on moral grounds.

“We feel that we are in complete compliance with the laws of God and the laws of man,” stated Mark Lemko, the president of Neocutis’ American subsidiary, in response to an e-mail from one member of the public. The firm has prepared a general statement on the issue and a page of questions and answers, in which it argues:

- It wasn’t “involved with the acquisition of the initial fetal tissue” but knows abortion was done morally and legally. The fetus in question “could not survive to term” and its termination “was deemed medically necessary by attending physicians.”
- Medical research using fetal tissue has saved many lives; indeed, it was used to develop the vaccine for polio in 1952.
- Neocutis’ products do not “directly use the original tissue,” but “this single donation can enable production of some 900 million biological bandages for patients suffering severe wounds, burns and other serious skin conditions.”
- The cells from fetuses have “unique properties” that aid in healing without scarring, while animal cells may be rejected by the host.

In rebuttal, Vinnedge notes that Neocutis' website calls the company a "spin-off" of the University of Lausanne. It is, therefore, complicit in the abortion. Furthermore, Lemko told the Register the firm was started by University of Lausanne medical school scientists in 2002 to develop "new medicines using cell tissue technology."

More Abortions Needed

What's more, says Vinnedge, cell lines run out of steam, and after a few decades, more abortions will be needed to maintain production.

Also, she notes that *Dignitas Personae*, the 2008 encyclical from Pope Benedict XVI, says that the medical use of fetal tissue is moral only if the abortion was spontaneous and unintentional — a miscarriage, in other words — and only with the consent of the parents.

There is more wrong with Neocutis' claims, says Theresa Deisher, president of AVM Biotech, a Seattle research firm dedicated to producing morally acceptable treatments and vaccines.

Deisher, who has a Ph.D. in molecular and cellular physiology, argues that Neocutis is misleading when it limits the moral question to the "acquisition" of tissue from a single aborted fetus.

"The tissue comes from just one fetus, but to research the process properly, they would have had to do at least 10 and probably more like 100," said Deisher. "And since their research says they found male tissue worked better than female, that's probably 10 male and 10 female fetuses and, again, more like 100 of each."

Deisher also addressed Lemko's claims about the "unique properties" of fetal tissue. The same benefits can be obtained from tissue taken from the foreskins of babies. And there are alternative lines of research on healing that don't involve injecting fetal tissue. As for the morality of using abortion byproducts, Ted Furton, an ethicist at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, says Catholic moral teaching forbids Catholics from conducting research using tissue from fetuses and, as consumers, using products such as Neocutis' skin-care line.

Rarely Permitted

However, "Catholics are permitted the use of products derived from intentionally aborted fetuses when there is no alternative treatment," Furton said. "But they must do so only under protest," he added, citing Directive 66 from the U.S. Catholic bishops' "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services."

He cited the case of Rubella, a disease for which the only vaccine available came from fetal tissue.

As for Neocutis' line of skin-care products, it fails on all counts. Such products are not medically necessary in themselves, and there are morally derived alternatives.

What's more, he agrees with Deisher that Neocutis' claim that their products come from a single fetus that was going to die anyway doesn't hold water.

Furton said many cells from many fetuses would have had to be tried to find one that worked: "You don't just happen to get one cell to spontaneously reproduce magically."

Steve Weatherbe writes from Victoria, British Columbia.

Church Teaching on Vaccines

The Church has taken up the issue of the use of cells derived from aborted babies in various documents. In its 2008 document *Dignitas Personae*, the Vatican outlined guidelines for scientific research and for the production of vaccines or other products. It quoted Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, which said the use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation "constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed to a child once born, just as to every person." When researchers use "biological material of illicit origin which has been produced apart from their research center or which has been obtained commercially, there must be no complicity in deliberate abortion," said the Vatican instruction *Donum Vitae*.

Dignitas Personae says that when there is danger to the health of children parents may use a vaccine that was developed using cell lines of illicit origin, but "everyone has the duty to make known their disagreement and to ask that their health-care system make other types of vaccines available."

Most Flu Vaccines Avoid Moral Problem

As America girds itself to repel a pandemic of the potentially fatal H1N1 flu, Catholic activists are laboring to set up a systematic way of certifying and promoting morally acceptable vaccines and medical treatments.

None of the vaccines approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration uses aborted fetal cell lines, reports one of the those activists, Debi Vinnedge, the executive director of Children of God for Life, a Tennessee-based group that monitors the biotechnology sector for any examples of immoral research, especially the use of fetal tissue or cell lines derived from it.

"We are pleased," said Vinnedge. "Americans have enough public-health concerns without compounding the problem with moral issues." Nonetheless, she warns, at least one vaccine maker, Sanofi Pasteur, has H1N1 vaccine in development that uses a fetal cell line, PER C6. Vinnedge uses her COGforLife.org website to promote vaccines and other biotech products that conform to Catholic moral teachings. Her website contains a constantly updated list of vaccines that pass and fail the moral test.

Across the continent at Seattle's AVM Biotech, Catholic researcher Theresa Deisher has expanded beyond her initial purpose of making vaccines and treatments that meet Catholic moral criteria and has established the Sound Choice Pharmaceutical Institute to promote any producer of products that meet that standard.

"There will be two levels of certification," said Deisher. "The lower level means the product on the shelf was not manufactured using aborted fetal tissue. The higher level means there was also no use of aborted fetal tissue at the research stage."

Deisher expects drug manufacturers who apply for certification to let her see their research and to pay a fee for the certification. Fetal cell lines regenerate quickly but can contain contaminant DNA from the original fetus that could provoke an immune reaction in the recipient of a vaccine.

The use of aborted fetal tissue or its cell line derivatives is widespread. "There is some absolute quackery being practiced on desperate people seeking cures," she said. "They are being injected with fetal tissue when there is no valid evidence it will work."

— Steve Weatherbe