

Trump terminates NIH medical research over use of fetal tissue

Enlarge / A seal that reads "US Public Health Service" adorns a building on the campus of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland.

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President Trump personally made the call to impose new restrictions on the use of fetal tissue in medical research, according to reporting by The Washington Post. The decision, announced Wednesday by the Department of Health and Human Services, pleased anti-abortion advocates while horrifying medical researchers, who say the move will cripple lifesaving research that helps millions of patients.

In a statement made Wednesday, June 5, the HHS explained the new restrictions, which primarily include discontinuing research projects conducted within the National Institutes of Health by government scientists that involves the use of tissue collected from aborted fetuses. According to HHS, that applies to only three active research projects out of more than 3,000 in progress by NIH researchers.

HHS also said it would not continue a multi-year NIH contract with a laboratory at University of California, San Francisco, which was using fetal tissue to study HIV treatments. The contract had been limping along on 90-day extensions while HHS

conducted an audit of NIH-funded research involving fetal tissue. The latest extension expired on Wednesday, June 5. HHS did not specify the reasons for letting the funding expire or reveal the results of the audit.

In statements to the Post, UCSF Chancellor Sam Hawgood called the decision “abrupt” and said that the school had “exercised appropriate oversight and complied with all state and federal laws.”

“We believe this decision to be politically motivated, shortsighted, and not based on sound science,” he added.

Beyond UCSF’s grant, HHS said that the new restrictions will not disrupt other current NIH-funded research projects involving fetal tissue—at least not yet. For any new NIH grant application seeking funding for research involving fetal tissue (or for any current funding of such projects to be renewed, which typically occurs on a 5-year cycle), researchers will have to get approval from a new ethics advisory panel appointed by HHS Secretary Alex M. Azar II.

Ethical conflict

HHS described this process by saying that the “ethics advisory board will be convened to review the research proposal and recommend whether, in light of the ethical considerations, NIH should fund the research project—pursuant to a law passed by Congress.”

Overall, HHS said the new restrictions were based on the Trump administration’s ideology. “Promoting the dignity of human life from conception to natural death is one of the very top priorities of President Trump’s administration,” HHS noted in its statement.

A White House spokesperson confirmed to the Post that Trump himself was behind the research restrictions. “This was the

president's decision," spokesperson Judd Deere said, calling it "another important policy... to protect the dignity of human life."

Doctors and researchers disagree with that point, noting medical treatments and advances achieved using fetal tissue. The American Medical Association, for instance, pointed out in a statement that fetal tissue was used in the development of the polio vaccine. Before the vaccine was developed, the virus crippled an average of more than 35,000 people a year in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Fetal tissue has a role in legitimate scientific research, including transplantation, and federal funding is crucial for such research," AMA President Dr. Barbara McAneny said in the statement. "Fetal tissue obtained during the termination of a pregnancy should be handled no differently than other tissues obtained during a medical procedure."

HHS added in its statement that it will pursue alternatives to fetal tissue for research. Last December, it announced a \$20 million funding opportunity to develop such alternatives. Scientists, however, note that currently there are no validated alternatives that fill the same roles as fetal tissue in critical research projects.

Trump isn't the first president to get involved with medical research using fetal tissue. As The New York Times notes, when President Bill Clinton took office, he quickly lifted a 5-year ban on research involving fetal tissue imposed by Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

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