



Trump Administration Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board Released Report Recommending A Near-Total Ban Of Lifesaving Research

Summary:

On August 18, 2020 the Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board released its final [report](#).

The report comes only a few weeks after the Board's membership was made available to the public when the panel met for its first meeting. The panel — at least [two-thirds](#) of which have anti-abortion beliefs and stated opposition to fetal tissue research — was tasked with determining whether National Institute of Health (NIH) grant and contract proposals using fetal tissue are “ethical.”

In line with the Trump Administration's attacks on lifesaving research of this kind, the report recommended against funding for 13 of the 14 grant proposals reviewed. The only study that was recommended for funding looks into validating alternatives to fetal tissue research. Two members of the panel included a dissent published as a part of the report, stating that the group was designed to “block funding of as many contracts and grants as possible.” They closed by warning of detrimental implications of defunding fetal tissue research, including for COVID-19.

Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board Released Its August 2020 Report Recommending Against Funding For Research Using Fetal Tissue

Weeks After Its Only, Mostly Closed-Door Meeting, The Ethics Advisory Board Completed Its Report Urging Near-Total Ban For Fetal Tissue Research

In Its August 18, 2020 Report, The Ethics Advisory Board Recommended Against Funding 13 of 14 Research Proposals Using Human Fetal Tissue. “In [a report issued on Tuesday](#), the Human Fetal Tissue Research Ethics Advisory Board, established in February by the Department of Health and Human Services, recommended against funding 13 of 14 research proposals. Health Secretary Alex M. Azar II will make the final decision, but the panel's opinion is expected to hold great weight.” [[New York Times, 8/18/20](#)]

The Only Proposal That The Report Recommends Is For Research Into Alternatives To Fetal Tissue. “The one proposal that passed muster with the board, on a 9-6 vote, was another attempt to develop an alternative to human fetal tissue, using as a comparator fetal tissue that has already been obtained and stored in a biorepository.” [[Science Mag, 8/18/20](#)]

The Ethics Advisory Group Sent Its Report To HHS After Operating Largely In Secrecy. “The board sent its advice in a report to HHS Tuesday, less than three weeks after the

announcement of its members, two-thirds of whom are outspoken opponents of abortion, fetal tissue research, or both. The group has operated in secrecy, with even its own members unaware of who else was on it until the end of July, when it held [a single, day-long virtual meeting](#), most of it closed to the public. Members were required to sign nondisclosure agreements about their deliberations.” [[Washington Post, 8/18/20](#)]

The Report Does Not Name The Grant Proposals Themselves, Nor Which Way Each Of The Board Members Voted. “The 15-page report does not name any of the researchers or their projects. But it shows that the board’s votes were splintered to varying degrees, with four of the proposals receiving a 14-1 vote against. The most common reason cited for recommending against funding a project was the contention the researcher had not provided adequate ethical justification for using fetal tissue. Two proposals were rejected unanimously, with board members saying they were weak.” [[Washington Post, 8/18/20](#)]

The Report Included An “Extraordinary, Unsigned” Dissent From Two Of The Board’s Members Decrying The Board’s Bias And Warning Of Restricting Fetal Tissue Research’s Effects On COVID-19

“Two Members Of The Group Issued An Extraordinary, Unsigned Dissent Included At The End Of The Report.” [[New York Times, 8/18/20](#)]

The Dissent Stated The Board’s Anti-Fetal Tissue Research Constitution Was By Design To Block Funding For “As Many Contracts And Grants” As Possible. “Two members of the Board asked that a dissenting opinion be included for the record, as follows: ‘This board was clearly constituted ...so as to include a large majority of members who are on the public record as being opposed to human fetal tissue research of any type. This was clearly an attempt to block funding of as many contracts and grants as possible.’” [[Report Of The Human Fetal Tissue Research Ethics Advisory Board- FY 2020, 8/18/20, p. 13](#)]

The Dissent Warned That The Report’s Recommended Outcomes Would Negatively Impact Therapy Development Including For COVID-19. “The outcome of the Board’s deliberations are thus clearcut and will paradoxically fail to reduce the use of human fetal tissue in the development of humanized mice needed for therapy development including for COVID19.” [[Report Of The Human Fetal Tissue Research Ethics Advisory Board- FY 2020, 8/18/20, p. 13](#)]

The Majority Of The Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board’s Members Have Prioritized Their Anti-Abortion Ideologies Over Science Throughout Their Careers

The Report And Establishment Of The Board In The First Place Exemplifies Anti-Abortion Ideology Interfering With Science. “The report, and the establishment of the 15-member panel, revived a decades-old political and scientific battle — fueled largely by social conservatives who now account for a significant part of President Trump’s political base — over whether taxpayers should fund research involving human fetal tissue. The fight is tangled up with the debate over abortion rights, though some of the tissue involved comes from fetuses that were not intentionally aborted.” [[New York Times, 8/18/20](#)]

The Report Mentions Abortion 25 Times And Explicitly Denied Funding Recommendation For Research Being “Too Interwoven With Abortion.”

- **The Report Contains 25 Mentions Of Abortion.** [[Report Of The Human Fetal Tissue Research Ethics Advisory Board- FY 2020, 8/18/20](#)]
- **The First Reason Cited For Denying One Of The Research Proposals (10 Voted Against, 5 For) Was That The Study Was “Too Interwoven With Abortion.”** [[Report Of The Human Fetal Tissue Research Ethics Advisory Board- FY 2020, 8/18/20, p. 8](#)]

At Least Ten Of The Board’s Members Have Opposed Abortion; A Majority Have Also Expressed Opposition To Fetal Tissue Research, And/Or Stem Cell Research. “[At least 10 of the board’s 15 members have publicly opposed abortion](#), fetal tissue research, human embryonic stem cell research, contraception, or a combination of these.” [[Science Mag, 8/18/20](#)]

One University Of Pittsburgh Virologist Called The Board And Its Report “A Ban Disguised As An Ethics Committee” — That Is Almost An Entirely Christian, White Panel. “Some also attacked the composition of the committee. ‘This is a ban disguised as an ethics committee,’ says Carolyn Coyne, a virologist at the University of Pittsburgh. She also noted that the board had just two nonwhite members. ‘So, the ‘ethics’ of research was decided by a largely Christian/Catholic, white panel.’ Coyne is using placentas from elective terminations of pregnancies to study how the maternal immune system defends the fetus against viral invasion.” [[Science Mag, 8/18/20](#)]

Read more about the Board’s ideological imbalance with Equity Forward’s fact sheet: [Two-Thirds of the Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board Members Elevate Ideology Over Science](#).

Experts And Lawmakers Including The One Member Of The Advisory Board Who Has Used Fetal Tissue In His Research Decried The Report

Board Member And UCSD Neuroscientist Lawrence Goldstein Decried The “Obvious Bias” Of The “So-Called Ethics Board” And The Devastating Impacts Of Its Recommendations On Disease Research. “Only one board member, Lawrence Goldstein, a neuroscientist at the University of California, San Diego, has been an outspoken advocate of fetal tissue use. ‘I am obviously disappointed by the obvious bias in the membership of the so-called ethics board and the obvious biased consequences for the outcome,’ he tells ScienceInsider. ‘Excellent disease-relevant research will likely not be funded and it will not be possible to reduce the need for human fetal tissue in disease research.’” [[Science Mag, 8/18/20](#)]

The International Society For Stem Cell Research (ISSCR) Called The Review A Disheartening “Near Ban” On Fetal Tissue Research. “The evaluation process for research should be insulated from ideology and special interests,” said a statement swiftly issued by the International Society for Stem Cell Research. “It is disheartening to see an ethics review perverted by an administration seeking to achieve a policy goal, a near ban on research with human fetal tissue.” [[Washington Post, 8/18/20](#)]

Rep. Frank Pallone, Chairman Of The House Energy And Commerce Committee, Called The Outcome Of The Report “Predetermined” Given Its Stacked Membership Opposing Fetal Tissue Research. “The report was sent to the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and the House Energy and Commerce committee. Rep. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.), the Energy and Commerce chairman, said in a statement, ‘The outcome of this report was predetermined when the Trump administration stacked the advisory board that prepared it with

ideological opponents of fetal tissue research. ...We should be pursuing new cures and treatments based on science, not ideology.” [[Washington Post, 8/18/20](#)]

Anti-Abortion Groups Including Susan B. Anthony List Were Quick To Praise The Advisory Board’s Recommendations

SBA List Praised The Report And Urged HHS Secretary Azar To Adopt Its Recommendations. “‘This was a serious review of the ethical considerations surrounding use of human fetal tissue in research by highly-credentialed and distinguished professionals, following the process set out in federal law,’ said Mallory Quigley, vice president of communications for the antiabortion group the Susan B. Anthony List. ‘We hope to see Secretary Azar adopt these recommendations.’” [[Science Mag, 8/18/20](#)]

- **Five Members Of The Ethics Advisory Board Are Associated With The Charlotte Lozier Institute, SBA List’s Research Arm.**
 - Maureen Condic
 - G. Kevin Donovan
 - David Prentice
 - Kathleen Marie Schmainda
 - Ingrid Skop

[[Lozierinstitute.org, accessed 8/19/20](#)]

....As A Reminder, SBA List Had The Trump Administration’s Ear In Rolling Back Fetal Tissue Research In The First Place

Anti-Abortion Groups Including SBA List And Its Research Arm, The Charlotte Lozier Institute, Influenced Trump Administration’s Targeting Of Fetal Tissue Research. “Since HHS announced in late September a wide-ranging audit of the use of fetal tissue in federally funded research, groups that have long sought to outlaw its use say they are finally being heard. They view such research as morally repugnant and unnecessary because they contend other techniques can be used — an assertion many scientists reject. ‘This is a pro-life administration,’ said David Prentice, vice president and research director of the antiabortion Charlotte Lozier Institute, who said members of his group and the affiliated Susan B. Anthony List have met with Pence to press their case. ‘It’s just nice to have someone who will listen and not just close the door in your face.’” [[Washington Post, 12/12/18](#)]