

President Obama signs executive order lifting the ban on federal funding of embryonic stem cell research

On March 9, 2009, President Barack Obama signed an executive order lifting the ban on federal funding of embryonic stem cell (ESC) research.

In his remarks, President Obama said:

"Today, with the Executive Order I am about to sign, we will bring the change that so many scientists and researchers; doctors and innovators; patients and loved ones have hoped for, and fought for, these past eight years: we will lift the ban on federal funding for promising embryonic stem cell research. We will vigorously support scientists who pursue this research. And we will aim for America to lead the world in the discoveries it one day may yield."

The Huntington's Disease community is looking forward to a day when the disease can be stopped in its tracks, possibly through RNA interference therapy to disrupt the production of the HD protein. Once that becomes possible, there is good evidence from mouse models that substantial recovery can occur. Still, restorative therapy will be needed for some patients and it may be possible to use embryonic stem cells for that purpose.

Federal funding may be critical to develop the technology to the point where pharmaceutical companies will be interested in funding potential treatments for HD and other neurodegenerative disorders. Even without additional federal funding, however, the order resolves another difficulty. When the ban was in effect, researchers were required to keep all resources involved in research with non-approved ESC lines separate from those used in federally funded research of any kind. That meant duplication of equipment, space, and utilities usually shared among several projects in a research institution, adding substantially to research costs or making ESC research impractical..

The President closed his remarks by honoring advocates:

"As we restore our commitment to science, and resume funding for promising stem cell research, we owe a debt of gratitude to so many tireless advocates, some of whom are with us today, many of whom are not. Today, we honor all those whose names we don't know, who organized, and raised awareness, and kept on fighting - even when it was too late for them, or for the people they love. And we honor those we know, who used their influence to help others and bring attention to this cause - people like Christopher and Dana Reeve, who we wish could be here to see this moment."

A debt of gratitude is also owed to those in the HD community who raised awareness of this issue and advocated for reversal of the ban.

- Marsha L. Miller, Ph.D., March 9, 2009