

Experts reluctant to speak out on 'hot button' fetal tissue research

One of the hottest talking points in the last Republican primary debates was defunding Planned Parenthood, the nation's largest provider of reproductive health services. Carly Fiorina, a leading candidate made one of the most controversial statements against the health services provider when she said, "Watch a fully formed fetus on the table, its heart beating, its legs kicking, while someone says, 'We have to keep it alive to harvest its brain.'" Her statements, referring to the secretly recorded videos with Planned Parenthood officials that ignited national outrage in July, were shown to be [incorrect](#) by a number of media outlets, but served to add fuel to the fire.

At the heart of the issue is the allegation that Planned Parenthood profits from the sale of fetal tissues which are used for research. As a result, several conservative states are individually [considering](#) legislation to not only defund Planned Parenthood but also ban fetal tissue research. The most unnerving of these is in Wisconsin, which is considering a bill that would make fetal tissue research a felony punishable with a fine up to \$50,000 and six years in prison. "Labeling our faculty as felons for doing research that is state-of-the-art at any major medical school is not the right way to promote the University of Wisconsin and to build our strength," said UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank said in a [meeting](#) with the University System's Board of Regents, emphasizing the alarming nature of the bill.

Though the University of Wisconsin and its faculty have come out strongly in opposition to the bill, voices of researchers who see fetal tissue research as important have largely been missing from the national conversation on this controversy. The reason is quite clear. They are afraid of being targets of violent activism. Immediately after the videos were released, reporters found it difficult, if not impossible to talk to an expert. Virginia Hughes, the science editor at BuzzFeed wrote an [article](#) titled "Scientists Are Terrified Of Talking About The Planned Parenthood Videos" that reported on how most institutions and scientists refused any media engagements on the issue.

Fetal tissue, though not as widely used as before is still extremely important in our abilities to advance biomedical research. Transplanted stem cells obtained from fetal tissues for example, have [shown](#) to be an extremely promising avenue for treating Parkinson's disease. The lack of scientists speaking out is unfortunate and a bill like the one in Wisconsin could set a precedent in other states considering similar legislative action, threatening fetal tissue research and in a broader sense, academic freedom.

This isn't the first time that researchers in the U.S. have been attacked over their approach to conducting studies. In 2008, animal rights activists [firebombed](#) the homes of two researchers and [physically assaulted](#) another at his home because they used [animal models](#) in their research. Two activists who participated in demonstrations outside the homes of researchers at the University of California Santa Cruz, where the fire bombings happened were indicted earlier this year by the FBI on charges of domestic terrorism. A 2011 [poll](#) conducted by the journal *Nature* revealed the widespread nature of the problem.

Extreme attacks are rare, and there does not seem to have been any increase in the rate of their incidence in the past few years, but almost one-quarter of respondents said that they or

someone they know has been affected negatively by activism.

What's important however, was that many scientists including those attacked spoke out against the extremism. UCLA researcher David Jentsch organized a campus-wide protest in support of animal research that hundreds of people participated. In an [interview](#) with the LA Times he said wouldn't be deterred by the Animal Liberation Front, an activist group that claimed responsibility for death threats against him, "They're used to scaring people and getting their way. It's just not going to happen in this case."

Institutions and major funding bodies came out in support of animal research and the scientific community as well. In response to a firebombing attack at the home of Dr. Edythe London, a UCLA addiction researcher, Dr. Elias A. Zerhouni, then the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) came out with a strong statement condemning the attacks and explaining why animal research was important.

The knowledge we gain from animal models is used to develop life-saving treatments for many diseases affecting the public health, including addiction. This knowledge ultimately saves lives and improves the quality of life for individuals, their families, and all of society.

Major scientific societies such as the [American Association for Advancement of Science](#), and the [American Psychological Association](#) also issued with statements condemning the attacks.

The use of fetal tissue is a far more controversial than using animal models. But they are also of extraordinary value in conducting life saving research, as the handful of experts who have spoken out on the subject have indicated. Excepting a few, institutions around the country have for the most part stayed silent as well, preferring to not venture into a politically charged debate.

At the [Genetic Expert News Service](#) (GENeS) we tried to reach out to experts to comment on the issue when the videos were released in July. In nearly every case, we were turned down. Institutional media relations teams often said that faculty were not going to be able to comment given the sensitive nature of the subject. We also spoke to national scientific societies and received a similar response. The silence, though unfortunate is understandable to some extent given what we have seen from activists on relatively less sensitive issues like use of animal models in research.

Eventually we reached out to the Science Media Centre in London, hoping we might be able to get experts who were at a safe distance away in the UK to talk about the issue. Dr. Dusko Ilic, a stem cell scientist at King's College London (and a U.S. citizen) sent this comment.

The newest affair involving Planned Parenthood is a typical example how politicians are using legal and non-controversial subjects to make a splash and gain support of the insufficiently informed voters with radical views on particular issues. Fetal tissue is an important resource in biomedical science and the only way to obtain is to collect material from legal abortions. There is nothing contentious in providing biological material to researchers in exchange for cover

costs of handling and shipping, whether the material is a result of elective abortion or not. There is no difference between providing researchers with such material or surgically removed body parts and/or tissue following a surgery from medical reasons. Such material would be discarded otherwise with no benefits to anyone. In the USA, Planned Parenthood is one of the organizations that provides fetal tissue for research. No animal or in vitro model can be used as a substitute. Using religious beliefs as a political wedge to drive controversy over non-controversial issues related to science does not benefit anyone.

In the U.S., the strongest statements on this subject have been made in [editorials](#) like the one in the New York Times which concluded

Fetal tissue is a precious medical resource. It should be exploited for the many health benefits it can provide, not banned as part of a vicious, continuing assault on Planned Parenthood and the health services it provides to millions of women a year.

The lack of experts voicing their opinion in this debate has left a void that poorly informed politicians and activists have quickly seized to curtail what has been widely acknowledged in the scientific community as a critical resource, important for advancing our basic understanding of the human body and for developing breakthrough cures and treatments. Scientists need to speak up and institutions, funding bodies and scientific societies around the country need to support them.

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