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Bioethicist: Failed search for controversial cells shows danger of mixing science, religion

BY ARTHUR CAPLAN, PH.D

What should we think when a scientist claims to have found a cell in the human body with miraculous powers that no one before has ever seen and almost no one else can even find trying to follow his directions of where to look?

The small number of scientific proponents of the miraculous healing powers of a controversial form of stem cells called VSELS—very small embryonic-like stem cells -- are facing this very question. The usual answer is that, at best, the claim must be the product of wishful thinking, or at worst, fraud.

A just published study by the distinguished stem cell biologist Irving Weissman of Stanford University's School of Medicine says he and his team could not find VSELS or corroborate their alleged regenerative power. The Catholic Church, because of its opposition to embryo destruction to obtain stem cells for research, gave its blessings and money to VSELS therapy so it also now finds itself up to its miters in controversy.





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officials there had decided that worldwide battles over the ethics of using of embryonic stem cells merited a gathering of scientists and prominent Catholic theologians. To no one's surprise including mine, the meeting was designed as a celebration of the power of adult stem cells—naturally occurring cells in your body that can regenerate damaged tissue or grow new cells – including bone marrow, hair follicle cells and the lining of the gut and liver cells. The Vatican wanted these and only these kinds of cells to be used to cure now intractable diseases such as spinal cord injury, diabetes and heart disease. Those doctors and scientists who favored studying cells taken from human embryos, which meant their destruction, which also can regenerate many different kinds of cells, got little airtime and no ethical traction.

One of the strangest moments at the conference came when Polish-born researcher Mariusz Z. Ratajczak, now on the faculty at the University of Louisville, stood up and told the enthralled bishops, priests, Monsignors, cardinals, theologians and the few other odd ducks like me that he had found very tiny cells residing in adult cells that behaved just like embryos. Ratajczak said they could develop into all manner of other cells, thereby acting as natural repair kits, given the right conditions and genetic tweaking.

The theologians were delighted. They were so excited that they took the unprecedented step of investing the church's money in a company, Neostem, to help develop Ratajczak's discovery. His VSELS would provide an ethical way to use stem cells to cure disease while getting the Church out of a horrible bind—condemning embryo destruction for obtaining stem cells while so many worldwide suffered premature death and serious disability.





potentials claimed,” he wrote in the study, and doubts “that these cells have potential for clinical application in humans”. Weissman’ study is now the fourth to fail to find the miracle VSELS or to be able to show any evidence of their regenerative healing power.

The defenders of stem cells say their peers just don’t have the techniques down for finding them. But it is just as likely that in their hope to find a solution to stem cell research acceptable to the Roman Catholic Church and other religious groups they have let themselves find something that is just not there.

Science and religion do not usually mix. But when they do and when the power of religion is used to cheer for a particular research strategy not because of evidence but because of morality that creates a huge potential for trouble. Until someone other than those tied to the power of VSELS for religious or business reasons can find them, be wary of any claims about their power to heal. It is persuading one’s scientific peers, not priests, rabbis, imams and ministers, that is the key to progress in medicine and science.

Arthur Caplan, Ph.D., is the head of the Division of Medical Ethics at NYU Langone Medical Center.

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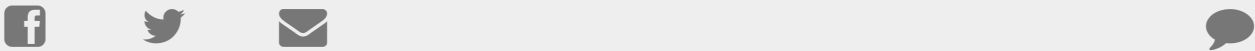
BY MAGGIE FOX

The Obama administration declared another victory Friday, saying that 3 million extra people have [signed up for Medicaid](#) or the related Children's Health Insurance Program since the new health insurance exchanges opened in October.

That's on top of the [7.1 million](#) that the administration says bought private insurance on the exchanges, which are one of the main features of the 2010 Affordable Care Act.

The new figures help fill in the blanks on one of the main measures of whether the law is working — how many people get signed up.

The law aims to get health insurance to the estimated 16 percent of Americans who don't have it, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.





The other is through making Medicaid available to people earning up to about 138 percent of the federal poverty level, or about \$14,800 for single people and \$31,000 for a family of four.

On Thursday, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Urban Institute issued a joint report estimating that [5.4 million people](#) who did not have insurance before got private insurance on the exchanges.

Medicaid, the joint state-federal health insurance plan for the low-income, covers 62 million Americans, or about 20 percent of the population. In some states it's restricted to children and pregnant women, in others it covers the poor and some disabled, as well.

The Congressional Budget Office projects that 9 million extra people will eventually enroll in Medicaid in 2014.

The Supreme Court ruled that states [could choose](#) whether to expand Medicaid and so far 20 states have refused to, all of them controlled by Republican legislatures. Twenty-five states have expanded, and five still have not decided.

States refusing to expand say it attracts people who were eligible before but who did not apply, and they cannot afford to administer an expanded program. They also oppose spending any more federal money when there's a deficit.

The Health and Human Services Department says states are [losing millions](#) in federal subsidies by not making Medicaid available to more people.

"There's no deadline for states to expand, so we're going to keep working with the remaining states as they decide to come on board,"





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