

AT  
LARGE

# Another modest proposal

Affairs at the University of Nebraska Medical Center stink to high heaven.

And it's not just the traffic in aborted fetal parts you smell — it's the uninformed Board of Regents, the tight-lipped spokesmen and women and the sordid company UNMC keeps.

News that the University of Nebraska Medical Center is using fetal tissue for research purposes has raised eyebrows, not the least of whose include Gov. Mike Johanns, U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel, Attorney General Don Stenberg and Speaker of the Legislature Doug Kristensen.

But, "who cares?" seems to be the response of UNMC and the Board of Regents.

In a nation divided by the abortion controversy, in a largely pro-life state where abortion is denounced by the governor, the majority of the Legislature and all but one of the federal elected officials — one might think that someone in university administration would care.

Surprisingly, the Board of Regents seemed to be in the dark about the research until the news broke in The Omaha World-Herald last Sunday.

Regent Nancy O'Brien, chairwoman of the board, told the World-Herald her memory was "pretty foggy" about the issue. Regent Don Blank told the World-Herald that the research information "may have come before us on some list."

Regent Chuck Hassebrook, vice chairman of the board, stated that the Board of Regents was not informed of the fetal tissue part of the research and declared that "any comments to the contrary are incorrect."

He went on to say that the board should have been informed about the controversial research.

So, who's right, the chairwoman or the vice chairman? They knew, or they didn't know?

Well, they're not the only ones who don't seem to know which way is up. Sandy Goetzinger in the UNMC public affairs department was unable to provide information as to when UNMC began to receive federal dollars for the research, how much money UNMC has received or the year-by-year breakdown.

She commented that "the details of grant information is harder to come by than you think."

Apparently so. When Dr. William Berndt, vice chancellor at UNMC, was asked how long the research had been going on, he said, "I'm not certain about all of the details, but as far as I can tell, since about 1995."

Hmm, interesting. Dr. James Linder, interim dean of the College of Medicine at UNMC, said the research began in 1997. Well, no matter, they're only details.

According to Regent Robert Allen, one of the chief goals of UNMC is to attract big-name researchers, and "if we don't let them do the research they want, they won't come."

Allen also indicated that he considered this effort on the part of UNMC to be successful, saying that it attracted researchers from Johns Hopkins University. "That's like getting God out of heaven."

Not quite, Mr. Allen.

Nobody really remembers seeing anything, nobody knows details, nobody has the same story and nobody knew anything about fetal tissue.

The fetal tissue is "donated" to UNMC by one Dr. LeRoy Carhart of Bellevue.

Incidentally, Dr. Carhart, founder of the Bellevue-based Abortion & Contraception Clinic of Nebraska, is one of the primary partial-birth abortion providers in Nebraska and is on record stating that partial-birth abortion is his preferred method for the abortion of fetuses 12 weeks and up.

Partial-birth abortion is a procedure where labor is induced, the child is delivered three-fourths of the way and then the base of the skull is pierced and the cranial contents suctioned out.

It's the cranial contents that UNMC wants.

And as compensation for his donation, Dr.

Carhart was appointed a volunteer faculty position in pathology and microbiology.

Although Dr. Carhart does not receive direct monetary rewards for his donation, he has benefited significantly.

In July 1997, Carhart testified that he was not board certified in any area and was not a specialist. In October 1997, he was appointed to the volunteer position at UNMC and began assisting prestigious researchers.

"He has developed a method of isolating populations of brain cells," UNMC spokesperson Tom O'Connor told The World-Herald.

Vice Chancellor Berndt was adamant that Carhart was not paid but agreed that he was "compensated for his cooperation" through his appointment. He also acknowledged that Carhart would not have been appointed if he were not donating fetal tissue.

Berndt indicated that UNMC was happy to work with Carhart because the Medical Center had prior sources for fetal material, but none of them had worked out.

Regent Robert Allen said that the appointment of Carhart didn't bother him in the least. Allen said he thought Carhart was appointed because of his "cooperation and talent. He tries to save lives, not destroy lives."

That's a fresh outlook on a man who makes his living suctioning the brains out of unborn children.

Regent Chuck Hassebrook commented that, while he's supportive of the research, he's "generally opposed" to partial-birth abortion. He also indicated that the appointment of Carhart was something he "wants to look into."

UNMC reports that they receive over \$1 million in federal grant money from the National Institutes for Health (NIH) for the research.

NIH prohibits direct compensation for fetal tissue in grant funded projects.

Exact figures and breakdowns of NIH grants were not provided by UNMC — remember, the information is hard to come by.

Well, if one were to check the NIH Web site,

one would find more information than one could possibly decipher. None of the grants for UNMC specifically listed Alzheimer's, but there was a total amount of assistance for UNMC listed by fiscal year:

1995: \$12,006,664

1996: \$13,889,441

1997: \$14,920,348

1998: \$16,202,664

1999: \$20,657,686

Of course, not all of this money went to research involving fetal tissue. But who can really tell?

One thing's for certain — UNMC did some fancy maneuvering to hold on to the research money.

Even though the controversial testing is for Alzheimer's research, interim dean of the College of Medicine at UNMC, Dr. James Linder, reported to The World-Herald that the money was initially granted for AIDS-related research. Linder contends that any findings would be beneficial to both diseases.

Wait Mr. Linder, couldn't it just be that fetal tissue research for AIDS was unsuccessful, but you didn't want to give up the money so you spun the Alzheimer's bit?

Isn't it true that in at least thirty years of fetal tissue testing (Geoffrey Chamberlain received a professional award for research in 1968, as reported by The American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, for research using whole aborted fetuses) none of it has been very insightful?

And isn't it in fact true, Mr. Linder, that although the controversial practice of fetal stem-cell research was once touted as "Parkinson's Progress," it has been bemoaned by researchers like Dr. Paul Ranalli, professor of neurology at the University of Toronto, as "hugely unimpressive"?

Hmm?

Well, UNMC still received over \$20 million from NIH this year. And "God" came to visit from Johns Hopkins. So at least we've got that

going for us.

No matter about anything else. What might actually be of grave consequence are the ethical questions that surround the Medical Center's (blood) money.

Attorney General Stenberg has long been a strong opponent of abortion and called for a full disclosure of the research process, including how the tissue is obtained, transported and what abortion method is used.

It is highly likely that the tissue donated by Carhart is from partial-birth abortions, since this procedure would prevent contamination of the "cranial contents."

The moral dilemma here is quite clear: The suctioning of brain tissue is what kills the fetus.

Fetal research at UNMC is directly related to brain tissue.

We're sacrificing the lives of the young to save the lives of the old.

UNMC argues that the research does not promote the practice of abortion.

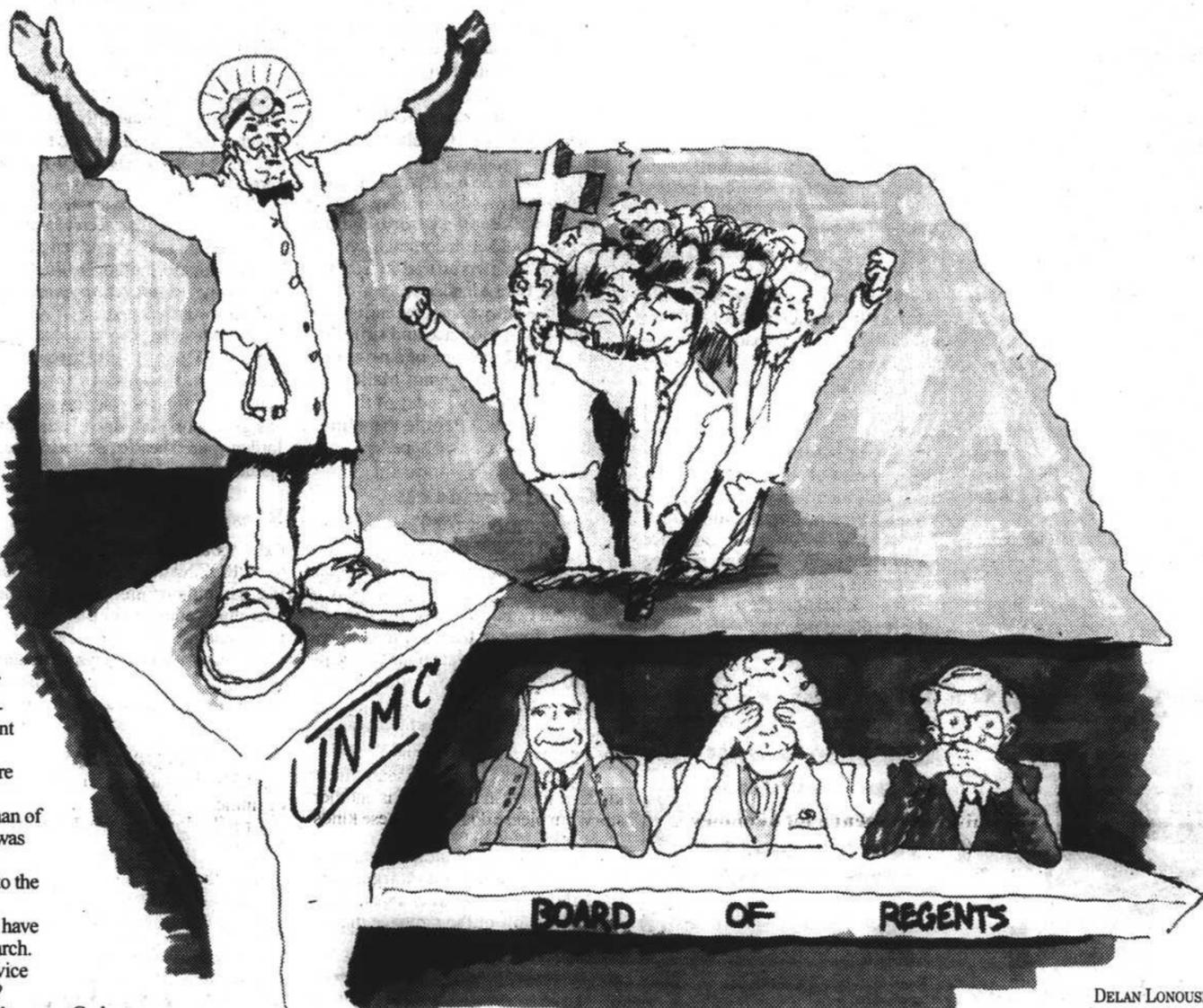
Yet the defense of the research is that it will produce good from a bad situation. This tries to suggest some justification for a deplorable practice. The defenders of fetal tissue research are searching for an absolution that will never come.

Others argue that since these abortions are happening anyway, we may as well put the remains to good use. Well, folks, let's just follow that through to its logical conclusion.

Why don't we use the rest of the fetus? Hell. There are starving kids in Africa. Serve 'em up some 'human tissue mass.' After all, it's not a person, and we might as well put it to good use.

No, on second thought, this doesn't make such good sense. In fact, when Nebraska's elected officials have denounced the research and the Legislature has voted to make the practice illegal (the case is still in appeals, thanks to a lawsuit by Carhart), it makes sense for UNMC to stop its Nazi research.

It makes sense for UNMC to respect Nebraskans' wishes concerning their tax dollars and the University of Nebraska's reputation.



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