

HHS Bans Crucial, Life-Saving Research Involving Fetal Tissue

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The HHS has discontinued all research at the NIH that involves the use of human fetal tissue.

What happened: The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has discontinued all research at the National Institute of Health (NIH) that involves the use of human fetal tissue. Research funded by NIH grants will be allowed to proceed through the end of its current grant period; however, any projects seeking renewal will be subject to review by an ethics advisory board. As of June 5, 2019, HHS has terminated a contract with the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), ending 30-years of research towards HIV treatments. This contradicts previous statements made by both HHS and NIH officials that said that they would not permanently ban this important research and would support the scientists carrying it out.

Why it matters: There was no scientific rationale for this decision. The banning of fetal tissue research was done for wholly political reasons, and the effects could be disastrous – scientific labs could close, cutting-edge drug treatment and HIV research could be permanently stalled, and life-saving medical treatments could be delayed or never come to fruition. In its statement, the HHS affirmed the Trump administration’s dedication to “promoting the dignity of human life from conception to natural death.” However, by restricting scientists’ ability to utilize the unique properties of fetal tissue, the administration is doing the opposite: it is threatening the lives of countless people who would benefit from new treatments for HIV, Alzheimer’s, and other diseases. Despite its comments to the contrary, HHS is prioritizing political considerations instead of listening to its scientists, and since there is no alternative to the use of fetal tissue in research, HHS is threatening the lives of people who rely on this research for their very survival.

By completely banning federal research using fetal tissue, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has gone against its [mission statement](#) to “enhance the health and well-being of all Americans” and is failing to listen to its own scientists who [say](#) that there are no alternatives to the use of fetal tissue in research. Research involving fetal tissue has led to lifesaving medical [discoveries](#), including the development of the polio and chickenpox vaccines, treatments for cystic fibrosis, and a greater understanding of the [effects of Zika](#). The ban applies to all National Institute of Health (NIH) scientists working in government labs but does not extend to

scientists funded by already approved NIH grants. However, non-government research projects seeking renewal of NIH funding will need to go through an ethics review board. The Trump administration's new ban is just the latest in a series of related actions. In September 2018, HHS ended a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [contract](#) with the only company in the U.S. capable of supplying human fetal tissue for research purposes and without public announcement, [temporarily banned](#) NIH scientists from acquiring any new fetal tissue. At the same time, HHS began an audit of all federally funded studies involving fetal tissue. In December 2018, HHS announced that they would renew the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) contract for HIV research for only 90 days instead of the customary one year, prompting [concern](#) that funding would soon cease entirely. HHS terminated both UCSF funding and all NIH fetal tissue research in June 2019.

In response to the ending of the FDA's contract with Advanced BioScience Resources, 64 medical organizations and universities, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and Harvard University, [sent a joint letter to Congress](#), asking them to oppose limitations on fetal tissue research. They emphasized the fact that fetal tissue research has saved the lives of millions of people through medical breakthroughs, including vaccines against polio, rubella, measles, chickenpox, and rabies; and led to treatments for diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, hemophilia, and cystic fibrosis.

HHS has allocated [\\$20 million](#) to find alternatives for fetal tissue in research. However, leading scientists have argued that adequate substitutes for fetal tissue do not yet exist, which means that the ban will halt lifesaving research for the foreseeable future. In a [letter](#) to HHS Secretary Alex Azar, 70 scientific organizations explained that fetal tissue cells are less specialized than adult cells, and they can be grown in culture quickly, making them ideal for developing vaccines. Stem cells and tissue from adult cells, alternatives [commonly cited](#) by opponents of abortion, lack complex signaling interactions that are necessary to study human disease processes. In contrast, fetal tissue is the "[gold standard](#)" for creating human immune systems in mice, enabling scientists to study autoimmune diseases such as HIV. The Zika virus is another case where [fetal tissue](#) is essential to understanding how birth defects arise in a developing fetus. The Trump administration's ban on government fetal tissue research and restrictions on grant funding will directly endanger people who could benefit from life-changing HIV and Zika treatments. For an administration that [has claimed](#) to be "pro-life" and "pro-science," this policy has the effect of sidelining scientific research and the people whose lives depend on that research.

It is also clear that the administration is minimizing the importance of scientific research so that it can bow to political interests. UCSF Chancellor Sam Hawgood [denounced](#) the HHS decision to end a 30-year HIV research partnership between the NIH and UCSF as "politically motivated, shortsighted, and not based on sound science." The Trump administration's focus appears to be on [appeasing opponents of abortion](#) rather than prioritizing medicine and science. This decision is one in a long line of Trump administration policies that place ideology above scientific consideration. A bioethicist at the University of Wisconsin [highlighted](#) the fact that science is taking a backseat to politics at the HHS, "In reproductive health, climate change, the effect of pollution, we're seeing a defiance of scientific fact when it comes to setting policy."

Even non-government scientists will be hampered by this policy. HHS has instituted an ethics review board for academic and university research centers that use fetal tissue in their research and rely on government grants for funding. The 14 to 20-member review board will be tasked with spending up to 6 months evaluating any proposals involving fetal tissue, significantly delaying or even completely halting critical research. A bioethicist at the New York University School of Medicine [described](#) this process as a way to stifle future research, noting that “the chance of that [governmental] committee approving fetal tissue for anything is next to zero.” UCSF was already complying with scientific integrity and ethics policies as dictated by a [1993 statute](#), yet their program was defunded. While claiming to stand for ethical judgment, the Trump administration is denying scientists the opportunity to develop cures for diseases that could alleviate health ailments for the American people and save lives.