

NATION

Seattle Scientist Launches Pro-Life Biotech Firm

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SEATTLE — A new biotechnology firm has been set up to develop treatments and vaccines without resort to aborted fetal tissue or embryonic stem cells. It's good news for families, physicians and pharmacists concerned with providing the best health care and respect for human life.

AVM Biotechnology LLC (as in "Ave Maria") of Seattle is the brainchild of career biotech researcher Dr. Theresa Deisher. It has the support of America's leading campaigner against the biomedical use of aborted fetal tissue: Children of God for Life.

Deisher, who over her 17 years in the field has amassed 23 patents, said, "It is our goal to develop human therapeutics that are morally acceptable and compatible with the magisterium of the Catholic Church."

For Deisher, a mother of two and member of Assumption parish in Seattle, that means alternatives to medical products that used aborted fetal tissue in the production — as with many vaccines now mandated in the United States for childhood ailments such as mumps, rubella, chicken pox and hepatitis.

In 2005, the Pontifical Academy for Life issued a statement saying Catholics are permitted to use such vaccines if no alternative is available. The statement said such use constitutes "a form of very remote mediate material cooperation" with the act of

abortion. But the academy stressed that the failure of pharmaceutical companies and health authorities to produce ethical, non-abortion derived alternative vaccines has



PIONEER. Theresa Deisher (above) is trying to apply her years of biotech experience to find moral alternatives to embryonic stem-cell **research.**
Deisher: Ken Ken Requa; Pediatrician: CNS photo

created "a context of moral coercion" that "must be eliminated as soon as possible."

Deisher hopes to avoid even treatments developed with tainted knowledge -- knowledge derived from research using aborted fetal material, such as embryonic stem cells.

"It would be like using the research results on hypothermia from Nazi Germany that involved murdering people," she said.

Deisher's initial business plan called for a focus on research into regenerative medicine for diseases such as heart failure, heart attack or stroke. Stem cells that reside

in everyone's body, for example, work naturally to regenerate tissue but do so less well with age and disease.

"Any treatments that improve the functionality of adult stem cells in recovery from disease and trauma would greatly improve the lives of older or chronically ill people," Deisher said.

However, after consulting with Children of God for Life executive director Debi Vinnedge, Deisher decided the business plan should give priority to developing vaccines. "Many vaccines in the U.S. are contaminated with aborted fetal tissue," she said. "There are no ethical alternatives, putting parents, physicians and pharmacists in a moral dilemma."

However, alternatives to the use of aborted fetal tissue are available and could be developed relatively quickly.

Marie Hilliard, director of bio-ethics and public policy for the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, said, "We very much support this concept," though she added, "We can't endorse specific enterprises."

She said the Church's position, as laid out in the Pontifical Academy for Life's 2000 Declaration on the production and the scientific and therapeutic use of human embryonic stem cells, was that people might morally use vaccines developed from

aborted embryonic tissue when alternatives were unavailable "to protect themselves, pregnant women and society." Hilliard said that many vaccines are grown in human cell lines many generations removed from the original aborted tissue. "The cell lines the vaccines are now being grown in are 'descendent tissue' that contains no aborted human tissue."

Nonetheless, Hilliard added, the Pontifical Academy cautioned that Catholics should use these vaccines only "under protest" to both their doctors or the authority who administered the vaccine.

"We have recommended that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services encourage the development of alternative vaccines with funding," she added. "These alternatives, which do not depend on human embryonic cell lines, exist in other countries and getting them approved here would be the most economic and fastest way to provide alternatives here."

Said Vinnedge: "Fifty percent of the market is pro-life. So the company could make enough money off the vaccines to fund new research."

Vinnedge said there is also a lot of room for ethical alternatives to the use of embryonic stem cells in research — even with the recent development of a method of turning adult skin cells into "pluripotent" stem cells touted as being ethically untainted.

This derivation of stem cells from adult skin cells by Japanese and American

scientists renders unnecessary the use of embryonic stem cells.



Vinnedge, however, pointed out that the skin-cell-to-stem-cell embryonic process employed by the researchers actually involved the use of aborted fetal tissue.

"You had to really dig into their reports to find it, but it means they depended on immoral sources," she said.

Deisher said for- well over a decade the biomedical research establishment has relied on aborted fetal tissue for both research and manufacture of treatments. "They don't have to use it but they do because it's so readily available and convenient."

Far from being worried by the possibility of competition from other ethical research firms, AVM "hopes to set up a division to encourage such companies in every city."

Deisher admits she has come a long way from her college days, when she was "a radical feminist" who had nothing good to say about the faith she was raised in. She made the decision to start the company after hours of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

"Science became my god. Luckily, my mother wore out the rosary for a good eight to 10 years, and I gradually came to see that my intrinsic values were those of the Catholic Church and that its moral teachings made innate, natural sense."

Steve Weatherbe writes from Victoria, British Columbia