Stem Cell Delusions
The government juggernaut rolls on

In order for a belief to be considered delusional, argued the psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers, it must be held with absolute conviction and not be changed by compelling counterargument to the contrary. The determination with which the British government has pursued embryonic stem cell research, despite its failure to deliver new therapies, fulfills this definition.

CMF has long opposed embryonic stem cell research as unethical on the basis that, by destroying human blastocysts in order to extract stem cells, it uses embryonic humans as a means to an end. But the evidence is growing that embryonic stem cell research is also unnecessary, as ethical alternatives to embryonic stem cells yield more treatments each month.1

The government, on the basis of the (long outdated) 1999 Donaldson Report, has consistently argued that embryonic stem cells were more versatile than adult or umbilical cord blood stem cells and could potentially be used therefore to treat a greater range of diseases. In order to overcome the problems with immune rejection of donor cells, it further recommended that embryonic stem cells be harvested from embryos produced by cell nuclear replacement (therapeutic cloning), the same technique used to produce Dolly the Sheep. The patient’s own somatic cell nuclei were to be placed into enucleated eggs.

The main problem with this technique was the low success rate (it took 277 attempts to produce Dolly). Difficulties in obtaining the large number of eggs and the highly publicised risks to donors of ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome (OHSS) have now led to a change in strategy; the use of animal-human hybrids produced by the same cloning technique.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, currently before Parliament, seeks to legalise this practice, although in a flagrant abuse of the democratic process, the HFEA recently granted two licences for producing animal human hybrids even before the bill had passed.2 Ironically, on the very day the House of Lords was debating the issue, researchers in both Japan (Yamanaka) and the United States (Thomson) announced that, by inserting four genes, they had successfully reprogrammed human skin cells into cells with all the properties of human embryonic cells,3 leading Dolly’s creator Ian Wilmut publicly to say he was abandoning cloning technology.4

To date, not a single embryonic stem cell line has been produced from cloned human embryos, whilst there are over 70 diseases that are currently being treated successfully using adult or umbilical cord blood stem cells.5 David Burrowes MP, in introducing a recent bill to improve the harvesting and use of cord blood stem cells has further highlighted the fact that the government has its eggs in the wrong basket.6

As the truth continues to emerge, there will no doubt be many suffering from degenerative diseases who will be asking why they have not been told the truth and why the government, backed by self-interested biotechnology companies, continues, against the evidence, to drive down a scientific blind alley.

Open all hours?
The BMA clash with the government over plans for extended open hours

The New Year kicked off with an announcement of yet another NHS shake-up. In a speech pegged around the forthcoming 60th anniversary of the NHS, Gordon Brown revealed that the nation’s rarely-seen-in-the-NHS, healthy citizens are to be encouraged to see the doctor anyway, in order to prevent them turning into sick, expensive patients.7 The Prime Minister committed the NHS to a screening programme to rival the private sector: ‘the health service has really got to change...from being the curative service...to being also a preventative service’. And it’s going to be less www.nhs.uk and more www.my-nhs.uk: ‘so you get to see the doctor you want at the time you want and the hospital you want’.8

The Prime Minister also hinted that he would make getting to see the doctor a whole lot easier. And sure enough, following up on Labour’s pre-election—that-never-was promise,9 a plan to get GPs to work evenings and Saturdays for no extra pay was unveiled in early February. The BMA declared it a lose-lose situation for GPs – accept Plan A or have Plan B (an even worse financial deal) imposed on you – but Health Secretary Alan Johnson went over their heads and appealed direct to every GP partner in the land.10

How then should we assess this situation? We could look at things financially. This proposal could make a huge dent in many CMF members’ wallets. Should that matter though? After all, Christians are not meant to be motivated by money.11 On the other hand, a ‘worker deserves his wages’ and accepting what is actually a back door pay cut will make giving cheerfully to the Lord somewhat harder!12

The deeper approach is to ask why the government feels the need to drive through these screening and opening hours measures. Gordon Brown’s speech provides our answer: he is doing all this to ‘meet the rising expectations of the British people’. Consumerism – the desire to ‘have it perfect’ with a perfect service and perfect health – is the driving force behind this and all other recent NHS initiatives.

What then should we do? We should pray for a lasting solution for the NHS. Pray for the healing of our nation from the sickness of consumerism.13

References
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13. www.stemcellresearch.org
principle, and were aware of statistics. We were aware that British Medical Association presentation and saw no major ethical problems to support the principle of organ transplantation.

Lords Select Committee we expressed strong support for the principle of organ transplantation but is opting out the right way to go? The pressure to do something about the gap, the need for two doctors signatures, nurses doing abortions and medical abortions in CP...