

MARCH OF DIMES: RIGHT TO LIFE — LIFESPAN POLICY STATEMENT

Adopted July 15, 1987; Amended January 19, 1998

In the years before Drs. Salk and Sabin, the March of Dimes had endeared itself to the American people by its unrelenting drive to eliminate polio, and by its beneficent support for the victims of the dreaded disease. Those of us who remember the fears we entertained for our children then, will be forever grateful.

Since their efforts were crowned by the glittering successes of Salk and Sabin in the late 50s, polio has been swept from the American scene. This left the March of Dimes (MOD) with a sophisticated national organization that had shown itself gifted in attracting scientists of renown, and in the art of raising money. Its leaders, then, sought a worthy cause that would fill a need and arouse the public conscience. They settled on Birth Defects—tragic occurrences that are visited on many families. The MOD has contributed to much worthy research since, although new therapeutic treatments within the womb are rare.

A controversy erupted between MOD and the pro-life movement in the 70s that centered on the genetic testing that has searched out defects that are untreatable in the womb. The work of amniocentesis was to insert a long needle into the mother's abdomen during the 14th to 18th week of gestation and withdraw fluid which took four to six weeks to yield answers. According to MOD's own reports, when results were positive, 97% of the parents opted to abort. Such abortions, of time necessity, were therefore done in the second trimester.




At the same time, grantees from MOD, speaking around the country, left no doubt that they welcomed liberated abortion and some told their audiences that they would refuse to use amnio unless parents promised to abort if tests were positive. (Now amnio is done in the 11th week of gestation which accommodates earlier abortions and another test, chorionic villi sampling, is done earlier still and for the same reason.)

In January, 1976, Right to Life - LIFESPAN and our pro-life friends in Michigan, adopted a policy of non-cooperation with MOD, and across the country the entire pro-life movement eventually followed suit. Then and always, we pointed out that whenever medical intervention in the womb could correct a defect, we welcomed that move. Then and always, we expressed our deep sympathy with parents of an affected child but that to kill is not to cure.

Although we had broken with MOD because of genetically triggered abortions, the facts of fetal experimentation, which followed speedily, had not yet come to the public view. Even today, the public is largely innocent of how far down the ethical slippery slope our beloved country has fallen.

When Roe v. Wade legalized abortion in 1973, an abundance of aborted fetuses became available and a fast bandwagon of fetal research was set in motion onto which scientists leaped exultantly. At first, pro-life influences encouraged strictures to be placed against much experimentation in government-funded laboratories, but MOD is a private group and is not subject to the same rules.



In the use of fetuses for research purposes, the human fetus was divided into two classes: The first was the fetus as a patient, i.e., a “wanted” child, therefore, a person. And this is where medical intervention sometimes found happy solutions. The second class was the “abortus,” the product of a planned or accidentally terminated pregnancy during the first 20 weeks of gestation. This second class was given no protection or status.

The ethical controversy sharpened when some abortion methods delivered a live baby (i.e., hysterotomy—a miniature Caesarean) and though first viewed as the “dreaded complication,” some researchers noted that tissues from a live baby made a better laboratory tool and began to look around for an abortion method that would deliver a live baby with less trauma to the mother.

Dr. Kurt Hirschhorn of New York’s Sinai Hospital, long time advisory Board member and grantee of MOD, author of its original Birth Defects Article Series, wrote, “With prostaglandins you can arrange the whole abortion...so the fetus comes out viable in the sense that it can survive hours or a day.”¹ Thereupon, it can be said that “a new and deep relationship between abortion and fetal experimentation was formed. It heralded the concept of a fetus as an organ farm in the real sense. [1]

The drug, Prostin Alpha 2, manufactured by Upjohn Pharmaceuticals, when used in second-trimester abortions, sometimes delivered a live baby. “...In 1982 the National Right to Life Committee reported that, in separate studies, Prostin Alpha 2 resulted in 7 to 9 (live) births in 100 abortions, a rate 30 times higher than with saline.”

It was found that this “fresh material” did offer viable tissues (as Dr. Hirschhorn predicted), and as two other MOD grantees wrote, this material “might be suitable for organ transplants...for vaccines, and for basic research.” These researchers were Dr. Mitchell Golbus and Dr. Robert Erickson, who wrote while working on a 1973 grant from MOD. [2]

Recently, WELS Lutherans for Life, alarmed by a paper published by MOD (Strategies in Genetic Counseling: Reproductive Genetics and New Technologies) began a dialogue with MOD about the use of aborted fetal tissue in their studies. They invited Dr. John Willke, (originally president of the National Right to Life Committee, now president of Life Issues Institute, Inc.) to study the MOD reply. He summarized his reaction to the MOD letter (4/15/97) in these words: “...the letter is a mixture of some truths, some half-truths and some false statements. It certainly would have been better had the MOD limited its comments to issues directly relating to diagnostic, mid-trimester amniocentesis rather than mixing many issues and then drawing sweeping conclusions.” [3]

WELS Lutherans then joined the established boycott of MOD and adopted the Michael Fund of Pittsburgh, PA for its research donations. The strictures placed on government-funded laboratories were lifted by executive order of President Clinton the day he took office in 1992, thereby placing virtually unlimited freedom in the hands of scientists who believe that the end justifies the means. It must be said, in justice, that some scientists stand tall in opposition.

In our original statement of protest to MOD policies, we absolved it of any close relationship to abortion itself. However, the passage of time and the literature have rendered this attitude extremely naive. A wealth of scientific articles places MOD hand in glove with the abortionists and reinforces Lifespan’s original boycott of the March of Dimes.

[1] Suzanne M. Rini: “Beyond Abortion,” A Chronicle of Fetal Experimentation, TAN books and Publishers, Rockford, Illinois 61105, 1993, p. 80.

[2] Ibid., p. 80. Taken from the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, 1974.

[3] WELS Lutherans for Life, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53222.