

?Trump ends federal funding of fetal tissue research

By Matthew Taylor
8 June 2019

The Trump administration on Wednesday cut off federal funding for medical research using fetal tissue. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced the new policy in a six-paragraph statement, but White House spokesman Judd Deere stressed that “This was the president’s decision.”

The order prohibits the National Institutes of Health from using fetal tissue in its studies and ends a \$2 million-a-year grant to the University of California, San Francisco, to research HIV treatments that has existed since 2013.

Other universities using the tissue in medical studies will be allowed to continue until their grants run out. They will then have to apply for renewal of their grants to new medical ethics boards created by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar.

The move was praised by anti-abortion zealots and denounced by scientists. Larry Goldstein, distinguished professor in the University of California at San Diego’s department of cellular and molecular medicine, who has advised researchers that use fetal tissue, said, “I think it’s ultimately a terrible, nonsensical policy. Valuable research that is directed at helping to develop therapies for terrible diseases will be stopped. And tissue that would be used will be thrown out instead.”

The elimination of funding for these projects, which use tissue from aborted fetuses, will imperil research into cures for a wide range of diseases, including HIV/AIDS, Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, and ALS (also known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease). It will also halt the development of new vaccines. In the past, fetal tissue has been used to help develop vaccines for polio, rubella, chicken pox, adenovirus, Ebola, rabies and shingles. Currently, research is being performed using fetal tissue to develop a vaccine for the Zika virus.

Fetal tissue research has also contributed to the development of treatments for cystic fibrosis, rheumatoid arthritis, hemophilia and various cancers. It is also used in research involving birth defects, blindness and treatments for spinal cord injuries.

The use of fetal tissue in medical research dates back to the 1930s, many decades before the right to an abortion was recognized by the US Supreme Court. By any estimate, the medical treatments developed through this research have spared many hundreds of millions from death and suffering.

The use of fetal tissue in scientific research is highly regulated. Women who have abortions must give their signed consent for the tissue to be used, and neither the woman nor the abortion provider is permitted to benefit financially from the donation.

Speaking to the *New York Times*, Professor Lawrence O. Gostin of Georgetown University said of Trump’s order: “It will affect everything from cures for cancer and H.I.V. through to Parkinson’s and dementia... The ban on fetal tissue research is akin to a ban on hope for millions of Americans suffering from life-threatening and debilitating diseases. It will also severely impact the National Institutes of Health, universities and other researchers, who will lose key funding for their laboratories and their vital work.”

Scientists have also disputed the claim that other tissues not derived from aborted fetuses can serve research purposes equally well. A letter sent to HHS Secretary Azar in December signed by multiple medical research groups stated, “Claims that other cells can be used to replace fetal tissue in biomedical research are patently incorrect. While there have been some advances in recent years that have reduced the need for fetal tissue in certain areas of research, it remains critically important in many other areas.”

The creation of the new medical ethics boards to approve any future research is a sham. The members will be appointed by Azar, who served as deputy director of Health and Human Services in the George W. Bush administration and then became a lobbyist for pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly, before becoming its president. Azar has long-standing connections to the far right, serving as a clerk to arch-reactionary Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia after graduating from law school and later joining the law firm of Kenneth W. Starr, where he assisted Starr in his investigations of the Clinton administration.

The panels will be composed of 14 to 20 individuals. In addition to the scientists who will supposedly comprise the majority, each panel must also “include a lawyer, an ethicist, a practicing physician, and a theologian.” All of these individuals will be hand-picked by the administration and, one must assume, vetted by Christian fundamentalist and anti-abortion organizations.

The inclusion of a theologian on a federal panel that will determine how medical research is conducted underscores the violation of the constitutional prohibition on the establishment of state-sponsored religion and the promotion of superstition and backwardness that are at the center of the fetal tissue funding ban.

The banning of fetal tissue research has long been a goal of anti-abortion activists. It follows recent legislation in Ohio, Kentucky, Louisiana, Alabama and Georgia prohibiting abortion if a fetal heartbeat can be detected.

For decades, these forces have promoted legislation that erodes abortion rights and curtails access to providers. They were unable, however, to make progress towards an outright ban due to broad support within the US population for reproductive rights. Now, with a far-right majority on the Supreme Court and a president who relies on the support of evangelical Christians to prop up his crisis-ridden administration, they are stepping up the drive to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and outlaw abortion.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: