

EQUITY

FORWARD

Research Relying on Fetal Tissue: A *Timeline of Ideological, Anti-Science HHS Politics*

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) political staff have routinely pursued anti-science and anti-abortion policies and actions. Using rhetoric pulled directly from far-right and anti-abortion groups, HHS political appointees have disrupted effective and important research, putting scientific advancement for lifesaving vaccines and treatments at risk. One such example is research using fetal tissue, where focus from anti-abortion groups has resulted in actions and policy goals that fail the real needs of the American public.

Halting Critical Research

In September 2018, HHS cancelled a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) fetal tissue procurement contract and opened an audit of all federally-funded research that relies on fetal tissue after pressure from dozens of anti-choice and faith-based groups. The contract was to enable research on immune response to medications.

Threatening to Cancel Essential HIV Research

In December 2018, HHS informed the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) that they were ending a seven-year contract midstream, with the decision coming from the highest levels. This project was utilizing fetal tissue in research to test “virtually all HIV therapies subsequently approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration since the 1990s.” Dr. Greene, the HIV researcher, said the moves are jeopardizing critical science.

Holding Sham “Listening Sessions”

In November and December 2018, HHS held “listening sessions” with stakeholders, including anti-abortion groups, scientific associations and patient advocacy organizations, to discuss the continuation of federally-funded research using fetal tissue. Led by Assistant Secretary Brett Giroir, who previously assured Rep. Mark Meadows in writing that HHS is “fully committed to prioritizing, expanding, and accelerating efforts to develop and implement the use of these alternatives” and portrayed HHS at “Pro-life and pro-science,” these meetings were clearly an attempt to bolster the ideological and anti-science policy goals of administration appointees.

Congressional Hearing on “Alternatives” to Fetal Tissue

In December 2018, the Republican-held House Oversight Committee held a hearing on alternatives to fetal tissue, though the vast consensus among scientists is that none exist today. The Majority’s witnesses were from the Charlotte Lozier Institute, the research arm of the anti-abortion Susan B. Anthony List, and used ideological rhetoric that echoed language directly from HHS political officials.

EQUITY

FORWARD

Research Relying on Fetal Tissue: A Timeline of Ideological, Anti-Science HHS Politics

Implementing Restrictions for NIH Research Grants Using Newly Acquired Fetal Tissue

In June 2019, the Trump administration issued [restrictions](#) banning the use of newly acquired fetal tissue in federally funded research projects. This decision came [contrary to the word of National Institute of Health \(NIH\) scientists](#), and rather, at the behest of anti-abortion lobbyists with outsized influence over HHS. The audit that had supposedly resulted in this decision has yet to be seen by the public.

Doubling Down on Limiting Fetal Tissue Research Even as the World Grappled With the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread in spring 2020, scientists [appealed to NIH officials](#) to use newly acquired fetal tissue to research treatments for the virus. This appeal was reinforced by a [letter](#) asking President Trump to lift the restrictions to advance COVID-19 research that was sent by a wide coalition of scientific and medical organizations including the American Pediatric Society, Columbia University Irving Medical Center, and Union of Concerned Scientists. As the coronavirus death toll continued to rise, the administration remained steadfast in blocking such efforts — a move [praised by the anti-abortion lobby](#).

Creating a “Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board” That is Comprised Primarily of Anti-Abortion Members Who Have Opposed Fetal Tissue and Stem Cell Research

HHS [announced](#) the formation of a new “Human Fetal Tissue Ethics Advisory Board”, to be housed within NIH, in February 2020. On July 31, 2020, the Advisory Board [convened](#) for the first time. The names of the [members](#) were released to the public on the morning of this meeting. Of the fifteen Advisory Board members, Equity Forward [found](#) that ten of them have anti-abortion views and connections that have influenced their scientific research and policy decisions. Also notable is that five of the members are employees of the [Charlotte Lozier Institute](#). The Advisory Board is charged with determining which NIH grant and contract proposals using fetal tissue are “ethical.”