Presentation Summary

1. **Rationale for ESCRO Committees.** What interests are we protecting with review of hESC research?
   - Fetal interest or potential human being that might be created from blastocyst?
   - Taxpayers?
   - Unanticipated outcomes, unexpected risks? [Note: IRBs overwhelmed by workload without embryonic stem cell research; Research moving so fast that useful to have panel of experts to get out ahead of the curve.]

2. **Scientific Interest in Extra Review.** Why should scientists want an ethical review of this research?
   - Respect for life
   - Ethical defensibility strengthened
   - Public accountability
   - Stem cell research most watched research in the history of science
   - Historical track record not good. Oversight by the public/ experts not a bad idea
   - Time and institutional structure that makes ethical reflection possible. Where does this research fit into our lives? What does this say about us as human beings if we go forward? Good questions to ask. Where is the line we want to draw? Avoiding historical mistakes valuable.

3. **Reframing the Question:** Shouldn’t ask why we ought to do this (extra level of) review. Should ask: What is the argument against it? Scientists not very good at policing themselves.

4. **Research Justification:** If we had stem cells that could only be used to treat male pattern balding, would that justify the research? Restoring hair would be valuable to many men, but in the larger scheme of things not all that important. Curing diabetes would be another thing.

5. **Should an ethics committee be protecting religious rights?** For other things we protect, we have good solid evidence for why we protect them. This may be fundamentally different. What are we doing discussing religious issues in a secular ethical forum? Response: other, non-religious reasons to reflect on issues in embryonic stem cell research. Ethical review can be justified on independent grounds: egg donation, privacy, informed consent, justice and access issues.

6. **Is there a middle ground?**
Some have argued that the early embryo (blastocyst), while not a human subject, nevertheless is cellular life that is deserving of “special respect.” Issue of not treating human blastocyst with “wanton disregard,” e.g., with no more respect than we might regard human skin cells.
Objection: But there is no rationale for treating a blastocyst with “special respect.” IVF embryos, when no longer wanted for reproduction, are discarded or abandoned. If we’re prepared to flush those away, then why can’t you work on them? What is the rational basis for treating embryonic stem cells differently from the way we treat other human cells?

Once we take this line, aren’t we then committed to significant changes in the way we practice IVF, requiring parents to implant all embryos created or others to adopt those “left overs.”

7. Intellectual property – how are the proceeds from any commercial products going to be apportioned? Important topic, but one for another session.

8. Asset allocation. Aside from ethical concerns, blastocysts are a scarce resource, worth careful allocation. Professor Kalichman suggests that we might use the three principles of replacement, refinement and reduction from animal subjects research in the stem cell field. Might this help us define what we are looking for here?

• Can the research goals be met without destroying a human embryo and with an alternative approach that raises less severe ethical challenges?
• If the research goals are best met by using human embryos, is it possible to do so without destroying the embryo or is it possible to do so by means that will not impair possible future development of the embryo?
• Can the research goals be met with the use of fewer human embryos?

8. Levels of review. Notice, what we’ve got here are really three kinds of review: scientific (merit of the proposed research), political (allocation), ethical. Can you have a project that is ethically sound that is not scientifically sound? Generally thought no, not if you are using human or animal subjects – or stem cell lines?

Caution about over-regulation. Some of the most famous discoveries in science have been serendipitous. Don’t want to restrict a study, though questions are worth asking.

9. Egg donor concerns. Impact of harvesting eggs from a healthy woman. Is it possible that she will be selling her healthiest eggs, with possible effect on later fertility or psychological effects? Not clear that the evidence supports such concerns, but it is worth considering.

10. Note that objections to embryonic research not just religious, but political, cultural, etc.

11. Conclusion. While the reasons advanced against embryo research may not convince those who do not share certain religious (or moral) beliefs, the existence of widespread objections may provide a reason to look more closely at the issues. Reflect as we proceed with caution.