

## Obama 'To Reverse Stem Cell Ban'

US President Barack Obama is expected to lift restrictions on federal funding for research on new stem cell lines, according to reports.

Officials say Mr Obama will authorise the move by executive order on Monday.

President George W Bush blocked the use of any government money to fund research on human embryonic stem cell lines created after 9 August 2001.

Scientists say stem cell research will lead to medical breakthroughs, but many religious groups oppose the research.

The embryonic stem cells used in research tend to be harvested from unused embryos created as a result of in vitro fertilisation treatment at fertility clinics.

Stem cells are cells with the capacity to turn into any other type of human cell, be it bone, muscle or nerve cell.

One embryo can provide a limitless supply because the cell lines can be grown indefinitely.

But the use of human embryonic stem cells in research is controversial with some campaigners saying it is unethical.

'Vindicated'

Researchers have also been developing techniques to create stem cells without using embryos, by modifying other types of cell.

The move to lift the ban on federal funding was welcomed by stem cell researchers.

"I feel vindicated after eight years of struggle, and I know it's going to energise my research team," Dr George Daley of the Harvard Stem Cell Institute told the Associated Press.

The federal funding ban has meant that scientists have been forced to separate any privately-funded stem cell research from their government-funded activity.

Mr Obama made it clear during the presidential election campaign that, if elected, he would reverse the Bush administration's decision.

President George W Bush had twice vetoed congressional attempts to have the ban lifted.

"I strongly support expanding research on stem cells," Mr Obama said on the campaign trail.

"I believe that the restrictions that President Bush has placed on funding of human embryonic stem cell research have handcuffed our scientists and hindered our ability to compete with other nations."

Like Mr Bush, President Obama has profound Christian beliefs but he has defined the issue in terms of restoring scientific integrity to government, says the BBC's Kevin Connolly, in Washington.

Lifting the funding ban fulfils a campaign promise, he adds.

Speaking to the BBC in January, Dr Robert Evans, a pastor and bioethicist, said he would oppose any move to allow federal funding for new stem cell lines.

"What it signals is that the human embryo has been denied moral standing and a corresponding right to life," he said.

"As an evangelical who believes all life is created equal in the image of God, and that we have moral standing from the moment of conception, I would view that as a very chilling decision." Source: BBC News