

March 18, 2021

Cathy Russell  
Director  
White House Office of Presidential Personnel  
Eisenhower Executive Office Building  
1650 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Director Russell:

On behalf of our physician and medical student members, the American Medical Association (AMA) urges President Biden to reconstitute the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues (the Bioethics Commission). Its absence during the previous Administration was to our detriment on issues ranging from genetically altering human embryos to allocating scarce health care resources during a public health emergency.

The Bioethics Commission, in various forms and names, has enjoyed a history of bipartisan support since the Nixon Administration. The first Bioethics Commission produced a seminal report that continues to govern medical research to this day. The Belmont Report, which was drafted in response to human research scandals including the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee, outlined the fundamental principles for medical research involving human subjects. The next Bioethics Commission produced a report, Defining Death, which led to the widespread acceptance of “brain death” and underpins our modern organ donation system. Other Bioethics Commissions have examined the appropriate use of human stem cells, abortion, and medically assisted suicide, to name a few.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced physicians and patients to make ethical decisions with no guidance from a Bioethics Commission. We have been confronted with grim choices of how to ration health care resources under crisis situations, the role of the federal government in allocating these scarce resources to the states, and how structural inequities have resulted in many communities of color having worse outcomes from COVID-19. A Bioethics Commission would have been invaluable in providing guidance on these pressing ethical questions, and still can be of great value as our nation continues to struggle with this pandemic and the longstanding inequities laid bare by it.

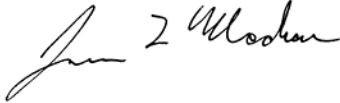
A reconstituted Bioethics Commission would find no shortage of issues to address given the absence of bioethical guidance over the preceding four years. It will ensure that President Biden receives the best available advice on bioethical issues of the day from leading experts in science, medicine, theology, philosophy, etc. Even when Bioethics Commissions have been unable to achieve consensus on issues, their disagreements inform all of us. No one knew what human stem cells were before leading scholars began to consider the ethical implications of their use 20 years ago. Today, virtually everyone has an opinion on the subject and there continues to be vigorous debate about the appropriate use of human stem cells as our understanding evolves.

For these reasons, we urge President Biden to reconstitute the Bioethics Commission with the best minds from the aforementioned fields. This will ensure that advances in medicine and science are ethical,

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equitable, and reflect the moral compass of our nation. Please contact Margaret Garikes at [Margaret.Garikes@ama-assn.org](mailto:Margaret.Garikes@ama-assn.org) or call 202-789-7409 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim L Madara". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James L. Madara, MD