

Anti-Abortion Laws Are Having a Dangerous, Chilling Effect on Zika Research



Stassa Edwards

Yesterday 4:55pm · Filed to: ZIKA ▾



12.2K



76



12



Following the series of “sting videos” aimed at Planned Parenthood and produced by the Center for Medical Progress, state legislatures and the House of Representatives opened a series of investigations targeting Planned Parenthood. While the investigations have found no wrongdoing on the part of Planned Parenthood, CMP’s videos have had a profound effect on legislation: state legislatures in Florida, Indiana, Ohio and Arizona have taken aim at cracking down on fetal tissue research. That research, Politico reports, is vital to developing a potential Zika vaccine and understanding Zika-related birth defects like microcephaly.

Much of our current knowledge about Zika, particularly its links to birth defects, is the result of fetal tissue research. Scientists agree that this kind of research—depicted as both illegal and immoral in CMP’s videos—is crucial to furthering knowledge of the virus. Yet it’s being hindered by lawmakers and anti-abortion activists alike.

“This is a situation where the vaccine is going to have to protect the mom and protect the baby. Fetal tissue is going to be needed to look at the effects,” Patrick Ramsey at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio told Politico.

And yet, as Politico notes, researchers invested in Zika and fetal tissue research are experiencing the inevitable negative effects of the constant, seemingly fanatical pursuit of Planned Parenthood and its partners, regardless of laws or facts:

A House panel investigating fetal tissue research is turning up the heat on researchers as well. Following a March 2 hearing in which Republicans argued that fetal tissue from abortions should not be used in research, committee Democrats said Thursday that chairwoman Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) planned to send up to 17 subpoenas demanding the names of individuals involved in acquiring the tissue or doing research on it.

Some universities and companies had redacted names from documents they sent to the committee out of concern about anti-abortion harassment or violence.

While the targeting of fetal tissue research is bound to have long-term effects, Florida’s newly signed anti-abortion laws might be particularly chilling. Earlier this month, Governor Rick Scott signed a Texas-style omnibus bill that, among many things, criminalizes the donation of fetal tissue. By all estimates, Florida is likely to be one of the hardest hit by Zika (a recent study from PLOS Current: Outbreaks

indicated that Miami and Southern Florida carries the highest risk for a Zika outbreak), but Florida's new law doesn't have an exception for Zika-infected fetuses. Meaning that Florida's regressive laws could profoundly impact Zika research.

“With the horrors of the Zika virus and its almost certain spread to Florida, to me it's unfathomable that anyone there would want to restrict this research,” dean of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health told Politico.

Florida's anti-abortion law stops short of banning fetal tissue research but five other states ban it outright. Indiana's recent anti-abortion bill requires that women bury or cremate aborted fetuses, thus preventing donation. Later this week, Arizona will likely become the sixth state to ban fetal research.

Beyond stifling research, Florida's laws will also make it harder for Zika infected women to obtain abortions. Currently, 73 percent of Florida's counties have no abortion clinics. And, as we've seen in Brazil, infected women are often desperate to obtain abortion services which are practically non-existent in the country. Foreign non-profits like Women on Web began shipping misoprostol to women who had requested the abortion-inducing drug but, according to a recent report from the *Los Angeles Times*, the Brazilian government has confiscated the vast majority of the packages. The result is large numbers of desperate women seeking unsafe and expensive options to terminate a pregnancy.

Image via AP.