

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



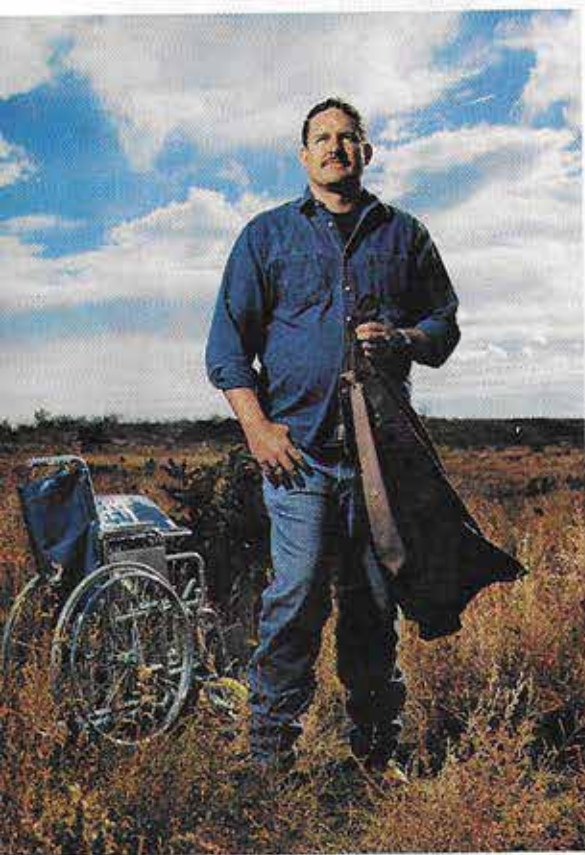
stem cells

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WILL WE GO?**

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From the Editor

A story about stem cells is a story about hope, which my dictionary tells me is “to cherish a desire.” For Dean Richardson, a former deputy sheriff in Cañon City, Colorado, hope appeared in July 2003 when doctors at Northwestern University in Chicago treated him with stem cells from his own bone marrow in an attempt to break the grip of multiple sclerosis, a



MAX AGUILERA-HELLWEG, M.D.

degenerative disease that had confined him to a wheelchair. The treatment seems to have worked. Richardson's wheelchair is gone, along with any active signs of the disease. Similar therapies have shown promise for curing certain cancers and repairing hearts.

If debilitating illness can be conquered with stem cell therapy, why is it so controversial? Isn't it a medical miracle to be celebrated? Yes and no. Though we stand on the threshold of the realm of possibility, we are not yet inside it. The doors opened by science include one marked “Moral

Dilemma.” Many scientists believe that stem cells from human embryos offer even more hope for cures than the ones found in bone marrow—the kind that helped Dean Richardson. An editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* called embryonic stem cell research “the great biomedical promise of our time.” Yet to destroy embryos to create stem cell therapies is an unforgivable obstacle for many people. So ethical argument mixes with scientific process. Hope must break through the rhetoric.

My own hope, the desire I cherish, is that we can freely discuss the complex, sometimes uncomfortable, friction between science and ethics. That's what our stem cells story is all about.