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2004-08-10

Scientists, politicians seek to bolster cases on future research

By Robert Miller

THE NEWS-TIMES

On Aug. 9, 2001, President Bush made what seemed to be a Solomon-like compromise on stem cell research in the United States. He would allow researchers to go forward, but only with the types — or lines — of stem cells already in use.

By doing so, Bush nodded in one direction to research scientists eager to explore how stem cells might be used to revolutionize medicine.

In the other, he sided with conservative ethicists and religious leaders who object to scientists creating life by fertilizing human eggs and then taking that life by removing cells from days-old embryos. The stem cell critics say the process is comparable to abortion.

Because Bush opposes abortion, "at first, I think I was surprised he even allowed research to go forward," said Dr. George Daley, a professor at Harvard Medical School and a researcher at Children's Hospital in Cambridge, Mass. "But it soon became apparent that this was a very limited number of lines."

The debate has become an issue in the presidential campaign. Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, the Democratic nominee, has pledged to open up stem cell research if elected. On Monday, First lady Laura Bush defended her husband's 2001 decision, saying it allowed scientists to move forward. At the same time, she said research is an ethical and moral issue "that must not be treated lightly."

"I hope that stem cell research will yield cures," the first lady told the Pennsylvania Medical Society. "But I know that embryonic stem cell research is very preliminary right now and the implication that cures for Alzheimer's are around the corner is just not right and it's really not fair to people who are watching a loved one suffer with this disease."

Most of the debate is over embryonic stem cells, the cells that form just after conception and that have the power to develop into all the body's organs. When cells from an embryo are transferred into a laboratory setting, they can be grown indefinitely. When the cells divide again and again, they launch stem cell lines.

When Bush made his decision, it was estimated there would be more than 70 lines available, but only 21 have so far been established by the National Institutes of Health. By limiting the lines, the Bush policy is keeping researchers from the basic material they need to move beyond that preliminary stage of research, Daley and others say.

"The science of human embryonic stem cells is in its infancy," Daley wrote in an opinion piece, "Missed Opportunities in Embryonic Stem-Cell Research," released Monday by the New England Journal of Medicine to coincide with the third anniversary of Bush's decision.

Daley wrote there are a host of diseases that might be helped by using stem cells, including schizophrenia, Alzheimer's disease and diabetes. New Fairfield residents Roger and Helene Karlin believe stem cell research might someday help their 10-year-old daughter, Lindsay, who has a genetic condition called Canavan disease.

Daley's lab is studying Fanconi's anemia — an inherited blood disease that causes bone marrow failure. Stem cell research could lead to the development of drugs to treat the disease or to other ways to repair faulty genes.



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"But the president's policy prohibits us from using our federal grants to pursue these avenues," he wrote.

In an interview Monday, Daley said federal funding — often granted in large blocks to pay for several years' work — provide the one stable source of money for medical research.

Researchers can use private money to explore stem cell lines outside the 21 approved by the National Institutes of Health. There have been 128 lines established worldwide, Daley wrote. Private funding is harder to find, however.

Furthermore, the NIH lines have been grown with older technologies that render them inferior to the new lines for research, Daley wrote.

But, as he acknowledges in his article, the restrictions on stem cell research in the United States predate Bush.

In 1966, Congress approved a measure that prohibits the use of federal funding for the creation of human embryos and for research in which human embryos are "destroyed, discarded or knowingly subjected to risk of injury or death."

Daley said as a result of the U.S. government's policy on stem cell research, scientists in several other countries — the United Kingdom, Israel, South Korea and China among them — have moved ahead of U.S. scientists in this research.

"All scientists want to do work on the cutting edge," he said. "But there are international colleagues of ours that can do things we can't."

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