



STEM CELL RESEARCH BILL SPARKS DEBATE

May 27, 2005

The battle over federal government funding of stem cell research is heating up: proponents in Congress say such research could help find cures for some injuries and diseases, while President Bush says it destroys life.

The House of Representatives passed a bill that would allow federal dollars to go toward research on stem cell lines created from donated embryos left over from in-vitro fertilization procedures.

The bill is headed to the Senate, but President Bush has vowed to veto the measure to prevent it from becoming law.

President Bush promises to veto bill

President Bush in 2001 limited federal funding of stem cell research to stem cell lines existing at the time, because creating new stem cell lines involves destroying human embryos. He has promised to veto the House-approved legislation, which would relax his restrictions.

"I believe the use of federal monies that end up destroying life is not – is not positive, it's not good," Mr. Bush said.

"And so, therefore, I'm against the extension of the research, of using more federal dollars on new embryonic stem cell lines."

If President Bush does veto the bill, it would be his first use of the presidential veto power.

Embryonic stem cells and federal funding

Embryonic stem cells are unique because they have the potential to develop into any type of tissue or cell in the body.

Many scientists believe research into such stem cells could help find treatments or cures for such conditions as spinal cord injuries, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, Lou Gehrig's disease and diabetes.

The cells are the product of in-vitro (literally, "in glass") conception -- when human sperm and egg are mixed outside the mother's body.

When a couple who has had trouble conceiving a baby tries in-vitro techniques, some embryos are transferred to the woman's body in the hopes that the embryo will result in a healthy baby. The technique has resulted in over half a million so-called test-tube babies since the first successful implantation in 1978.

But often more embryos are created than used. Some are frozen, so that the couple can use them later if they want to.

Supporters of the House bill argue that couples who created embryos for fertility treatment should be able to donate them to science.

"If you have informed consent, if these embryos are going to be discarded anyway, why not be able to use them for ethical research that could cure diseases that affect tens of millions of Americans?" Democratic Representative Diana DeGette from Colorado a cosponsor of the bill, told the NewsHour.

But embryonic stem cell research is controversial because harvesting the cells destroys an embryo that could have grown into a baby if implanted in a woman's uterus.

It is "morally wrong to take the tax dollars of millions of pro-life Americans and use it to support research that they find morally offensive," Republican Representative Mike Pence from Indiana told the NewsHour.

The House also passed a less controversial measure, which would encourage research on stem cells taken from donated umbilical cord blood. The House passed that bill by a 431-1 vote.

Big money research

Stem cell research can mean big money for states, which can then lure scientists to their area. The labs create high-paying jobs, tax revenues and intellectual property revenues that can translate into millions of dollars.

Last year, California passed Proposition 71, which allowed the state to provide funding for stem cell research that doesn't qualify for federal grant money. The legislation provides \$3 billion over 10 years to fund research grants and facilities.

New Jersey, Wisconsin, Texas and Illinois are also pursuing measures to make them competitive with California and avoid a "brain drain" of the best researchers and their scientific dollars to the West Coast.

-- Compiled for NewsHour Extra by Annie Schleicher

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