

Senate Revisits Debate On Stem Cell Research

Bush Pledges Second Veto in as Many Years

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Launching an emotional political and ethical drama that is widely expected to climax with the second veto of George W. Bush's presidency, the Senate yesterday began a two-day debate over the use of taxpayer dollars for embryonic stem cell research.

The Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act, to be voted on late today or tomorrow, would loosen Bush's Aug. 9, 2001, ban on federal funding for research on stem cells that were isolated from human embryos after that date.

The House passed a nearly identical bill in 2005, as did the Senate in 2006. But Bush vetoed it, saying it crossed a moral line since human embryos must be destroyed to obtain the medically promising cells.

This time, under an agreement between the majority and minority leaders, the Senate will vote again on the stem cell bill -- which passed in the House for the second time in January -- but will also vote on a competing bill introduced by opponents.

The alternative measure, the Hope Act, would back efforts to isolate embryonic stem cells from "naturally dead embryos" that succumbed after being created in fertility clinics. Proponents say the approach avoids the ethics quagmire of intentional embryo destruction. But many scientists call it a phony alternative, in part because there is no agreed-upon definition of embryo death.

Yesterday's debate was punctuated by the release of results from a study in which diabetic patients were able to live without insulin injections after getting an experimental treatment that included stem cells isolated from their own blood. Although those "adult stem cells" were not central to the treatment, the approach could undercut long-standing claims by some scientists that embryonic stem cells offer the best hope for a cure for diabetes.

Early in yesterday's debate, Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.) -- who introduced the Hope Act with Sen. Norm Coleman (R-Minn.) -- portrayed embryo-destroying research as unnecessary. Just as dead people can be sources of living organs for transplantation, he said, dead embryos can be sources of live stem cells that are "as viable . . . and as rich for scientific research as those cells that are derived from living embryos."

Isakson and Coleman acknowledged that the Senate has enough votes to pass the Stem Cell Enhancement Act, and may even have the two-thirds majority needed to override a veto. Supporters say they have at least 66 votes.

But with the House many votes short of that margin, and with Bush promising to veto the bill again, senators owe it to their constituents to pass a stem cell bill that will survive a presidential review, Coleman said.

"We're offering the opportunity to move the ball forward," he said. "It's not all that everyone wants. But it avoids the culture wars."

Several top-tier stem cell scientists, however, ridiculed the idea of stem cells from "dead embryos."

"The scientific community is just laughing at this," said Thomas Okarma, chief executive of Geron, a company based in Menlo Park, Calif., that says it is close to starting the first U.S. human tests of a therapy based on

embryonic stem cells. Even if live cells could be isolated from embryos that everyone might agree are dead, he said, such cells would be especially likely to be abnormal.

"I couldn't imagine using these for a therapeutic product," Okarma said.

Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute, a public interest group based in Wellington, Fla., called the Hope bill "nothing more than political cover so politicians can go back to their constituents and boast that they are supporting 'ethical' stem cell research."

Polls have indicated that a substantial majority of Americans -- including 50 percent of fundamentalist or evangelical Christians and 69 percent of Roman Catholics -- support loosening Bush's restrictions.

Supporters of the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act noted that fewer than two dozen of the approximately 70 stem cell colonies that Bush had said would be accessible under his policy became available. Meanwhile, hundreds of colonies created around the world since 2001 have remained off-limits to federally funded scientists.

Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), who introduced the act with Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), drew particular attention to a 12-year-old diabetic girl he recently met, who he said must inject herself with insulin 120 times a month.

"If adult stem cells could provide a cure for juvenile diabetes, she'd gladly take it," Harkin said, suggesting that only embryonic stem cells have the capacity to cure diabetes.

In research to be published in today's Journal of the American Medical Association, scientists from Brazil and the United States showed that adult stem cells may indeed help cure diabetes. In that study, 14 of 15 patients with early-onset Type 1 diabetes, once known as juvenile diabetes, could stop taking insulin after undergoing a procedure that partially destroyed their immune and blood systems and then reconstituted those systems with the help of stem cells that had been isolated from their blood in advance.

It remains to be seen how long patients can go without their shots; one patient has lasted almost three years, but others were treated more recently.

In any case, said lead researcher Richard K. Burt of Northwestern University, it was the partial destruction of each patient's immune system that was central to the treatment's effectiveness, since Type 1 diabetes is caused by an overactive immune system. The stem cells simply helped speed patients' recovery after treatment, he said.