

Stem cell research rally at FAU seeks to take politics out of science

By Joel Hood
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

October 30, 2006

Boca Raton · Try as they might, even some of the smartest minds in science can't seem to dissect politics from the debate over embryonic stem cell research.

The issue is one of many this election season to divide Republicans and Democrats. And so it was again on Sunday, despite the effort of organizers, that a rally to support stem cell research became another platform for candidates nine days from Election Day.

"This is not a political rally. This is about stem cells and about saving lives," co-host Eileen Flomenhoft Shevach said to kick off the event, which drew more than 300 to the Carole & Barry Kaye Performing Arts Auditorium at Florida Atlantic University.

But speakers who followed acknowledged that politicians have co-opted the stem cell debate to fit their own agendas. Consequently, they said, an issue of science has become deeply partisan. And that has led to the United States falling behind other countries in research that could provide cures for cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's disease, obesity, diabetes and many types of spinal cord injuries.

"This isn't a Democrat or Republican issue, it's a human issue," said Bernard Siegel, who founded the Wellington-based Genetics Policy Institute, a nationally recognized advocate for embryonic stem cell research.

The controversy over using embryonic stem cells for medical research typically falls along religious lines. Many social conservatives argue that destroying embryos in research is akin to destroying the origins of human life, a debate that often spills over into the larger issue of abortion.

President Bush and many Republican leaders have fought public funding of embryonic stem cell research. Those on the other side of the debate -- who include many Democrats and some high-profile Republicans such as former first lady Nancy Reagan and Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch -- argue the research is no more destructive to human life than in vitro fertilization.

Between impassioned pleas from doctors and parents of disabled children, the crowd heard from state Sens. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton, and Dave Aronberg, D-Greenacres, state Reps. Franklin Sands, D-Weston, and Susan Bucher, D-West Palm Beach, U.S. congressional candidate Tim Mahoney and others.

Their sentiment was unanimous: If you don't like decisions being made in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C., say so on Nov. 7.

"The White House is stuck in the Middle Ages," Aronberg said.

Many in the audience expressed frustration that the stem cell debate is so political.

"This is a power struggle and it's a disgrace," said Boca Raton resident Anita Goodlerner. "Our politicians should not be standing in the way when this research gives us so much hope."

Joel Hood can be reached at jhood@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6611.

Copyright © 2006, [South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#)

