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UNCERTAINTY LIMITS KEY U.S. RESEARCH

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HOUSTON - Rarely do both a living legend and a future Nobel laureate speak in the same room on the same day. But Saturday was an extraordinary day at the Texas Medical Center in the state's largest city.

First, Dr. Michael DeBakey - arguably the greatest surgeon of the 20th century and looking remarkably fit at 96 - addressed the Stem Cell Policy and Advocacy Summit hosted by Baylor College of Medicine (www.bcm.edu) and the Florida-based Genetics Policy Institute (www.genpol.org).

Stem cell research, including embryonic forms, "is of great importance and will produce and provide the knowledge that will be useful to society and hopefully will cure a whole array of diseases for which we have no cures at the present time," DeBakey said.

"I realize that today we have a certain amount of controversy about this field," the Baylor medical school chancellor emeritus noted. But "if you go back historically, you find (controversies are) ultimately resolved by the knowledge that society wants and cares about. And you will see that the first clinical cure you produce, the controversy will be resolved."

That is much to be wished, but it may be too much to expect from the religious conservatives who accuse embryonic stem cell researchers of emulating monstrously inhuman Nazi doctors.

Unlike most of those opposing this important scientific work, DeBakey served in the military during World War II, in the U.S. Army surgeon general's office. He helped defeat the Nazis. Based on what he learned during the war, Col. DeBakey designed the mobile Army surgical hospitals later made famous by a movie and TV series.

For anyone to suggest that because he supports embryonic stem cell research and its tremendous hope for cures and treatments, DeBakey is either a Nazi sympathizer or unethical would be uproariously laughable were it not so disgusting and insulting to this great Texan.

As hard as it may be to believe, DeBakey was only the warm-up to the real star of the conference Saturday, Dr. Woo Suk Hwang, the leader of a South Korea-based international research team that less than a month ago announced a remarkable advance in embryonic stem cell research.

Researchers at Seoul National University, working with scientists in other countries, cultured blastocysts matching the DNA of those who would be treated with the resulting stem cells. The scientists implanted nuclei from skin cells from would-be therapy recipients in donor eggs, replacing the nuclei of those eggs.

The process is called somatic cell nuclear transfer. DNA-compatible stem cells are "important if doctors are to develop cell-based therapies that won't be rejected by the body's immune system," according to The Associated Press.

These stem cells are "chromosomally normal, identically matched with the donor DNA by fingerprinting," Hwang reported Saturday. They "showed initial immunological compatibility."

"The fact that the stem cells were genetically matched to the individual skin cell donors means that science has the potential to offer them specifically tailored therapies if they can be safely transplanted into their disease or injury sites," the Voice of America explained.

South Korean news media accompany Hwang, a likely future contender for the Nobel Prize for Medicine, when he travels internationally, widely reporting on his overseas speeches. His countrymen almost universally regard the pioneering researcher as a national hero.

In contrast, were he working in this country, he would be loudly vilified as a Nazi or a baby-killer. The people who would do this are the ones to whom President Bush listened too closely in deciding his ill-conceived policy that sharply limits federal funding for embryonic stem cell research and the development of possible cures and treatments that could benefit tens of millions of people in the United States alone.

The South Koreans are doing what U.S. scientists should have been working on as early as 2002, William Caldwell IV, the chief executive officer of Advanced Cell Technology, told the conference Sunday. But Bush's August 2001 announcement prohibiting federal funding for research on new embryonic stem cell lines effectively dried up investment capital also needed to pay for the effort.

Venture capitalists will take many risks, Caldwell explained, but they fear political opposition or uncertainty. They do not want to invest millions of dollars in an endeavor Congress and the president might subsequently outlaw.



Dr. Michael DeBakey speaks Saturday morning at a stem cell policy conference in Houston.

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