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WILL TEXAS REMAIN WORLD-CLASS MEDICAL RESEARCH CENTER?

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HOUSTON - "I remain greatly indebted to Texas for saving countless lives with organ donation and so want to help it remain at the world's forefront," Dr. Woo Suk Hwang said Saturday afternoon at 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).

"This is important for Texas, the United States and all of us around the world since we learn so much from the brilliant doctors and scientists here," the pioneering South Korean embryonic stem cell researcher added.

Indeed, the Baylor medical school, under the leadership of Dr. Michael DeBakey, was in the forefront of regenerative medicine decades ago. With their work on heart surgery and transplants, DeBakey and his colleagues at the Texas Medical Center sought not just to treat, but also to repair and to regenerate patients' cardiovascular systems.

That helped make Houston one of the top medical research and treatment cities in the country. But it is not just the state's largest city that gives Texas its claim to be a world-class center for biomedical education and research. Add to that the medical schools and branch campuses in San Antonio, Dallas, Fort Worth, College Station, Lubbock, Galveston, Temple, Amarillo, El Paso and Odessa.

Unfortunately, though, the political uncertainty over the future of embryonic stem cell research, both in Texas and nationwide, and the sharp restrictions the adopted Texan now living in the White House imposed almost four years ago on federal funding keep these institutions from taking the lead in this promising research field with its potential for treatments and cures that could benefit tens of millions of Americans.

"We're sad that we're having to sit back and see other nations like Korea take the lead. It's unusual for us. We're supposed to be leaders. We are leaders. We've led in so many areas. This is so uncharacteristic of American biomedical research to be following," said William Brinkley, the dean of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at the Baylor medical school and one of the top cellular-molecular biologists in the nation.

"Academic health centers like Baylor College of Medicine, M.D. Anderson (Cancer Center), the University of Texas (medical schools) in Houston, San Antonio and Dallas - those centers require federal funding. Without it, we don't have the kind of funding that allows us to be leaders," the Baylor graduate dean noted.

Despite the current limitation and uncertainty, Brinkley's school announced the creation of a new Center for Stem Cell and Regenerative Medicine as "part of our cell and gene therapy effort," he said. "We have 15 investigators, all well-funded with federal grants, so they can't go beyond animal work. But they will continue to do outstanding research, and when the opportunity comes to carry this to the patient, we will be in line to do that with our clinical partners."

During his visit to Houston, Hwang laid the foundation for collaboration with the Baylor medical school. The South Korean's work on somatic cell nuclear transfer is particularly promising because this form of embryonic stem cell research greatly reduces the possibility that patients would reject implanted stem cells.

"I expect we'll be collaborating on various experimental protocols and technologies that he's a world authority on very soon, within weeks," Brinkley said. But "we're limited ... in the United States. We can't do many experiments. We've got to go to the other center of the world to do it. And we must do it with funding" that does not come from the federal government.

The growing support for embryonic stem cell research in Congress ultimately may make more federal funding available. At the very least, Congress is increasingly unlikely to pass legislation outlawing this research, although President Bush might well sign such a bill into law.

But the opponents of embryonic stem cell research also are working hard to convince state legislatures to ban it. Fortunately, the bills to do that in Texas did not make their way from committee to the floor for votes during the recently concluded regular session of the 79th Legislature. Still, the threat remains very much alive.

Regrettably, Gov. Rick Perry, who claims to support economic development, might well approve this kind of measure. He has said it is "fine with me" if states other than this one take the lead in embryonic stem cell research and developing potential treatments and cures. This is yet another reason he should not be re-elected next year.

The attitudes of Bush and Perry sharply contrast with those of earlier Texas leaders - such as the visionary Gov. John Connally - who worked hard and invested substantial public money to



Pioneering South Korean researcher Dr. Woo Suk Hwang speaks Saturday afternoon at a stem cell policy conference in Houston.

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