

State legislators to debate use of tax money for stem-cell research

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TALLAHASSEE · For the first time, Florida legislators this month will tackle the ethically charged issue of stem-cell research and whether tax money should pay for it.

The drama surrounding these cells -- particularly the use of stem cells from human embryos -- is surfacing in Tallahassee for both partisan and personal purposes.

South Florida Democratic legislators and Democratic candidates for governor say the research holds scientific promise and economic development potential for the state and they want to make the issue part of the 2006 election agenda. Republicans who support public funding of the science have offered family health cases to show that stem-cell research can find cures.

New plans for state-funded research surface as Florida pitches itself as a hub of biomedical research, largely because of the arrival of Scripps Florida in Palm Beach County.

On Wednesday, a committee of the Florida House of Representatives will debate a bill that would provide \$15 million a year for 10 years for the biomedical research -- a tiny fraction of the state's annual \$65 billion budget. An identical measure is filed in the Florida Senate.

By comparison, Californians in 2004 approved a \$3 billion stem-cell research program. Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts and New Jersey also have passed laws supporting research. Other states, such as Missouri, face ballot initiatives -- similar to one proposed in Florida -- asking voters whether to give scientists the right to conduct the research.

A citizen-initiative organized in part by Palm Beach County Commissioner Burt Aaronson to put public funding of stem cell research on the statewide ballot this fall was announced last year. But the effort has had difficulty getting the necessary signatures and may be postponed until the 2008 elections. Backers of the initiative have until Feb. 1 to turn in signatures to get the issue on the 2006 ballot, but have said they are not likely to reach the target.

With that initiative apparently stalled, proponents of stem-cell research say it's crucial that Florida make a commitment before other states lock in deals with researchers who might otherwise come here. "We're simply trying to make a statement [with the legislation] that, if we want to hold ourselves out there as a leading biomedical research state, we ought to be willing to spend money on any medically ethical and appropriate research, including stem-cell research," said state Sen. Ron Klein, a Boca Raton Democrat sponsoring the bill in the Senate.

Klein's bill is being co-sponsored by Sen. Rod Smith, an Alachua Democrat running for governor. Smith's challenger in the Democratic gubernatorial primary, U.S. Rep. Jim Davis of Tampa, also supports public funding of stem cell research.

States are getting involved because of restrictions imposed in 2001 by President Bush limiting federally funded research to existing embryonic stem cell lines.

Gov. Jeb Bush has voiced strong opposition to research involving embryos. Yet the issue remains hugely controversial within the Republican Party, with some anti-abortion politicians willing to support the science and others, particularly religious conservatives, opposed.

Several Republicans though, including Miami Republicans Juan Carlos "J.C." Planas, Julio Robaina and Juan Zapata have already agreed to co-sponsor the House bill. They support the funding because they think it may result in new treatments for diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, heart disease and diabetes and for spinal cord injuries.

"Anybody who is against this, I would just like them to spend a day with my father," Planas said. His father is 59 and suffers from the early stages of Parkinson's. He is a businessman and the vice president of a health trust that runs Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami.

"When we have embryos going to be destroyed by fertility clinics anyway, it makes 100 percent sense to use them to save human lives," Planas said.

Meanwhile, legislative sponsors of the new bills, including Klein and Rep. Franklin Sands, D-Weston, are trying to broaden support for their bills by adding restrictions that state money will be spent only for "medically ethical" research, including research that uses only embryonic stem cells resulting from in-vitro fertilization and embryos that would otherwise be destroyed.

The legislation would allow state money to be used for studies involving both adult stem cells and embryonic cells. It sets up an advisory council to oversee how biomedical research grants are spent. It also requires the Department of Health to develop and maintain an Internet-based consent form for the donation of certain embryos. It prohibits purchase or sale of embryonic fetal tissue for research purposes and it reiterates that human reproductive cloning is illegal in Florida.

The limitations in the bill, however, might not be enough to change the mind of critics who don't want any human embryos sacrificed for research purposes.

"Sadly, embryonic stem cell research is glossing over the fact that embryos are human beings and is seeking ways to justify the destruction ... by holding up a laudable end," said Michael Sheedy of the Florida Catholic Conference, which opposes the research but is still studying bills in the Legislature.

Others watching the legislation have economic hopes.

They suggest the new scientific technique will spawn a lucrative new branch of medical research, including studies that could take place at Scripps Florida and the private research parks that will surround it.

"In Florida, we have some of the best medical research facilities in the world," said Bernard Siegel of Wellington, founder and executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute and organizer of the citizen initiative. "Why should Florida be on the sidelines on something like this?"

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