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News

Debate educates students on stem cell issues

by Haya Radwan
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USF students filled the Phyllis P. Marshall Center Ballroom for the "First Annual Stem Cell Research Educational Seminar and Debate," organized by the Student Society for Stem Cell Research on Monday.

"Our goal for tonight's event is to help you create your own position by presenting you with the facts and valid arguments," presentation host and SSSCR member Unaiza Malik said.

The discussions of the event included the educational and legal explanations of embryonic stem cell research, followed by a debate on its ethical standards.

"The main (purpose) of stem cell research is that it can repair the damaged tissue, the damaged cells. You're getting healthy cells and you're implanting them onto the damaged cells, which (will) then proliferate into the healthy cells (and) take on that job of the healthy cells, and thus repair the damage," SSSCR President Shirley Bejarano said. Bejarano then moved on to explain the types of stem cells and how they can be extracted.


Discussing the legality of work in the field, SSSCR member Kevin Clifford explained the legal steps taken by the United States to restrict embryonic stem cell research.

"Those issues are whether federal tax dollars should go to (research), where other bans can be presented on them," Clifford said.

Clifford also said there is discussion whether people who disagree with the morals of embryonic stem cell research should be forced to support the research through tax dollars.

In 1994, after the cloning of a sheep in Europe, former President Bill Clinton prohibited the use of human embryos for research purposes. He then requested the National Institute of Health not fund the cause. Two years later, it was banned through legislation, Clifford said.

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“On August 9 in 2001, that is when Bush made an announcement that no federal funding will go to research on stem cells that were derived after that date,” Clifford said.

Since then, bills have been passed to fund embryonic stem cell research. The research is legal as long as certain guidelines are followed to require embryonic stem cells to be donated from IVF clinics, and not sold. However, President Bush has vowed to veto these bills.

Clifford also concluded the pending lawsuits on both sides are still an issue, and Congress has placed more emphasis on the controversial source of new embryos, not the potential benefits gained.

The issues discussed by Bejarano and Clifford at the seminar were essential in order to understand the debate whether the United States should increase federal funding for human embryonic stem cell research.

SSSCR Vice President Sriram Madhusoodanan debated in favor of embryonic stem cell research, while co-founder of the Forensic Society Zac Flowerree provided the voice of opposition.

Madhusoodanan discussed the research’s potential to find cures for certain diseases such as diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer’s disease and Parkinson’s disease. He also argued that embryos, once extracted, are disposed of, and could be put to good use if used.

“Given enough scientific funding ... this can be something great,” Madhusoodanan said.

After joking about how many people disagreed with his views, Flowerree made clear the burden of proof was on Madhusoodanan and “those advocating a policy change.” He also argued against federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.

“An embryo presents all of the potential to develop into a child given the right environment,” Flowerree said. “I don’t think we should destroy the embryo, which is really destroying that process, which is really what life is. Even though it’s already extracted, it can be implanted through and then adopted out.” ■

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