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Senate to Vote on Federal Funding for Stem Cell Research



By Jennifer LeClaire
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"How much longer can the Senate avoid debate on this vital legislation?" asked Lawrence T. Smith, Chair of the Board of the American Diabetes Association, whose daughter who has type-1 diabetes. "Every day the Senate fails to act to pass stem cell legislation is a missed opportunity."

The U.S. Senate on Thursday reached a landmark agreement to vote on controversial legislation that would allow federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.

The bill, which passed the House a year ago, is expected to gain broad bipartisan support in the Senate when it comes to a vote, likely in July. President George W. Bush, however, has threatened to veto it.

The bill would accelerate stem cell research by easing existing restrictions and supporting research that uses embryonic stem cells. Scientists believe this research offers great promise in the search of a cure and better treatment for many deadly diseases and disorders.

"For more than a year, the House-passed stem cell research legislation has languished in the Senate, holding up crucial research that has the potential to answer the prayers of America's families. I am pleased that the Republican [leadership](#) in the Senate has finally agreed to take up the legislation, which gives hope to the overwhelming number of Americans who support stem cell research," said House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi.

Hope for Diabetes Patients

Diabetes is one of the nation's most prevalent, debilitating and costly diseases. Nearly 21 million American children and adults have diabetes, up from 18 million when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last measured diabetes incidence in 2003.

If present trends continue, one in three Americans born in 2000 will develop diabetes in his or her lifetime. The cost of diabetes in the U.S. in 2002 was at least US\$132 billion; one in 10 healthcare dollars is spent on diabetes and its complications.

Stem cell research allows scientists to better explore how to control and direct stem cells so they can grow into other cells, such as insulin-producing beta cells found in the pancreas. Creating new beta

cells could mean a cure for type-1 diabetes as they would serve as a replenishable source of cells for islet cell transplantation. They could also provide a powerful tool for controlling type-2 diabetes.

How Much Longer?

"How much longer can the Senate avoid debate on this vital legislation?" asked Lawrence T. Smith, Chair of the Board of the American Diabetes Association, whose daughter who has type-1 diabetes. "Every day the Senate fails to act to pass stem cell legislation is a missed opportunity."

Simply blocking debate on this legislation will send a message to Americans who suffer from diabetes, cancer, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, spinal cord injuries and other debilitating diseases and disorders that they will have to continue to wait and hope for the cures and treatments that many experts believe embryonic stem cell research can deliver, according to Smith.

Public opinion polls show a strong majority of Americans support stem cell research, and it is expected that the Senate would pass the bill if it were brought to a vote.

"Over time, Senate support has grown steadily. As consumers get better educated on how stem cell research can save lives, we are very optimistic that the tide is going turn," Eve Herold, director of public policy research and education at the Genetics Policy Institute, told TechNewsWorld.

Bush Likely to Veto

Federal regulations that President Bush announced in 2001 have restricted the number of human embryonic stem cell lines available for federally funded research, and attempted usage of those lines has demonstrated that the number of adequate lines is even smaller due to contamination.

Since 2001, scientists have discovered much better methods of deriving stem cell lines so that they do not face the same contamination issues. Supporters of the bill said significant expansion in the number of available lines is necessary in order to fully reap the medical rewards of stem cell research.

A Three-Bill Strategy

Bush is likely to veto any stem cell research bill, but Herold is hoping the President will feel pressured not to do so because of the overwhelming support.

The three-bill strategy includes two bills that specifically address ethical concerns. One would make it illegal to implant embryos into a mother's womb in order to harvest cells or tissue. The other would promote alternative research on stem cells that would not involve destroying an embryo.

"If the anti-fetal farming bill is going to settle people's fears, then we are all for it. We are behind passing the bill," Herold said. The bills would require 60 votes in the 100-member Senate to pass. **ECT**

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