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Campus group hopes to sway stem cell vote

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Students at USF are hoping to send a message about stem cell research to the U.S. Senate today by taking part in a nationwide phone call campaign.

The Senate will debate a bill this Monday and Tuesday that could allow federal funding for stem cell research with a vote scheduled for Tuesday. The Student Society for Stem Cell Research (SSSCR) will be trying to get students to call their senators with support for the bill all day Monday.

The SSSCR was founded at USF in 2003 by graduate student Marion Riggs and has had more than 20 chapters pop up across the nation since. Its goal is to have as many students as possible call their senators to tell them to support federal funding for stem cell research.

According to The Associated Press, 70 percent of Americans support the senate bill that would expand federal funding.

Florida's two senators are split on the issue.

A spokesman for Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL) said Nelson was in favor of stem cell research and would vote in favor of legislation geared toward expanding the research.

Sen. Mel Martinez's (R-FL) office did not return phone calls regarding his stance on the issue, but he has historically been against expansion of the research.

As is, federal policies severely restrict the amount of funding handed out by the National Institute of Health (NIH) for stem cell research.

According to Riggs, this restriction is detrimental to the health advancements the research could bring.

"Researchers at academic universities are dependent upon the NIH's stream of funds, and when you cut off federal funding, you cut off the resources for that research," Riggs said.

Alzheimer's, spinal chord injuries, autoimmune diseases and Parkinson's were just some of the ailments Riggs said advancements in stem cell research could someday defeat.

Riggs also said the policies restricting funding for stem cell research are unfair to students performing medical research.

"It's a shame because students only get to do research that is funded," Riggs said. "This has long-term consequences on students' education and training."

Some opponents of stem cell research are not in favor of expanding the research because they believe the

medical miracles stem cell research will bring are only theoretical, and that using stem cells in research will consist of destroying life in order to save the lives of others.

While it looks likely that the measure will pass, President George W. Bush is said to have already promised to veto the bill, according to several news outlets.

Riggs called the prospect of a presidential veto "disappointing" and said that he disagreed with the idea of the president going against both the majority opinion of Congress and the American people.

"If he vetoes legislation then it definitely puts a lot of responsibility on his shoulders to answer to families, to people suffering from diseases that need this research," Riggs said. "It puts it squarely on him."

Where Florida's senators stand on the issue:

Sen. Nelson's spokesman told The Oracle Nelson is for the expansion of federal funding for stem cell research.

Sen. Martinez has historically opposed the idea of expanding stem cell research. His office did not respond to calls.

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