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Stem cell advocate 'a catalyst'

Wellington man works on grassroots support

By Josh Hafenbrack
South Florida Sun-Sentinel
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WELLINGTON · The suburban streets in this equestrian community might not seem like a natural hotspot for an advocate trying to increase taxpayer funding of embryonic stem cell research.

Then again, Bernard Siegel has never minded going against conventional wisdom.

In former professions, the onetime Coral Gables lawyer has gone up against an alien cult and promoted professional wrestling.

Now, he runs a group called the Genetics Policy Institute, which is at the forefront of the push for expanded embryonic stem cell research in Florida and nationwide.

Using e-mail and his frequent flier miles, Siegel mans the institute from his Buena Vida subdivision.

For a measure of its nationwide scope, consider this: Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle, a Nobel-winning scientist and the organizer of California's \$3 billion stem cell initiative, headlined the Genetics Policy Institute's annual conference, which ends today at Stanford University in California.

"This is a medical revolution," said Siegel, 56. "It could help cure diseases that touch 1 billion people on the planet."

But the research is highly controversial, since it involves destroying

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embryos, the beginnings of human life. Social conservatives have rallied to fight public funding of the research, so Siegel said he saw a need for someone to organize the scientists and patient advocates.

He also is vice chairman for Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures, a political action committee founded by County Commissioner Burt Aaronson. The group is trying to get \$200 million in state funding for embryonic stem cell research and is aiming to get the issue on the 2008 ballot.

At the federal level, President Bush has limited funding of embryonic stem cell research, leaving it to states to fund the work.

"Bernie is kind of a catalyst for the grassroots movement," said Eve Herold, who works for Genetics Policy Institute in Washington and is the author of a book due out this fall, *Stem Cell Wars*.

Siegel's home-office operation is typical of stem cell research advocates, who are struggling to counter well-funded religious groups, Herold said.

"We do everything we can, on a wing and a prayer sometimes, just to keep ourselves operating and making a dent in the movement," she said.

Even with a shoestring budget and only three full-time employees, Genetics Policy Institute has spawned activism on college campuses through an offshoot group called Student Society for Stem Cell Research. It started at the University of South Florida and has grown to almost 20 chapters.

"Bernie has thrown himself into this with a tremendous degree of energy and single-mindedness of purpose," said Dan Perry, executive director of the Alliance on Aging Research. "He has emerged as sort of a Paul Revere figure in the movement."

Siegel moved from Coral Gables to Wellington two years ago, after a 30-year legal career. He had decided to work full time advancing stem cell research, and he said the area seemed ideal, with The Scripps Research Institute opening a branch office in Palm Beach County.

"I think Wellington is the center of the world, as far as I'm concerned," Siegel said. "Biotech is booming."

Before getting involved in stem cells, Siegel built up a colorful resume. He started a minor league basketball team, the Miami Tropics, and co-owned Florida Championship Wrestling.

Then, in 2002, he made his first foray into the world of regenerative medicine. He filed a lawsuit against the Raelian cult, which claimed to have produced the world's first cloned baby.

"We burst the bubble of hysteria. We showed it was a scam," he said.

Now, he's trying to build political and public support for research that he calls the most promising science has seen. That starts in Florida, where Siegel said he's confident operations such as Scripps soon will have the option of doing taxpayer-funded stem cell research.

"We're a unique voice in the stem cell movement," Siegel said. "To me, I think this is the highest and best use of my life."

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