

Alameda Times-Star (CA)

June 6, 2004

Ex- first lady praised for backing stem cell research UC Berkeley conference attendees commend Nancy Reagan's stance

Author: *Rebecca Vesely, STAFF WRITER*

Article Text:

BERKELEY -- Proponents of stem cell research held a moment of silence for former President Ronald Reagan at a conference at the University of California, Berkeley on Saturday -- and praised former first lady Nancy Reagan for supporting the controversial research.

"I think this is going to be remembered as a significant point in our movement," said Bernard Seigel, executive director of the nonprofit **Genetics Policy Institute**. "That Nancy Reagan had the courage to go forward and say stem cell research is important, we thank her for that."

Last month, Nancy Reagan made an impassioned plea at a fund-raiser in Beverly Hills to take stem cell research out of the political debate, saying it could lead to a cure for Alzheimer's, the brain-wasting disease that afflicted her husband for the past decade.

"We have lost so much time already," she said at a dinner benefiting the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. "I just really can't bear to lose any more."

President Bush signed an executive order in 2001 limiting the research to existing stem cell "lines" from human embryos, and prohibiting the development of new lines. The embryos used in the research usually are left over from failed in-vitro fertilization attempts.

Many conservative members of Congress and religious groups oppose the destruction of the embryos for scientific research on moral grounds -- making Nancy Reagan's support all the more significant. Scientists speaking at the Berkeley conference said by limiting U.S. research in this burgeoning field, Congress and the administration were putting public health at risk.

"If you're in a position of authority to advise or erect a ban, then those lives are on you," said Dr. Irving Weissman, director of the Institute for Cancer and Stem Cell Biology at Stanford University.

An estimated 4 million Americans have Alzheimer's, and there is no known cure or cause of the disease.

The two-day event on the UC Berkeley campus had a decidedly personal tone, with attendees sharing stories about their battles with diabetes, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, spinal cord injuries and other conditions for which stem cell research holds enormous promise.

Idelle Datlof, co-director of the Stem Cell Action Network, which organized the conference, has suffered from muscular dystrophy since 1978.

"When I heard about stem cell research, I heard words never associated with my disease, words like 'repair' and 'regenerate,'" Datlof said.

Datlof and many others suffering from such debilitating diseases are pinning their hopes on a state proposition to fund the controversial research in California.

The initiative, which qualified for the November ballot Thursday, would authorize the sale of \$3 billion in state bonds over 10 years to fund stem cell research. All grantees, chosen through a new institute, would be required to stay within California. State Treasurer Phil Angelides and Controller Steve Westly have both endorsed the initiative as good for the state's economy. The Bay Area is already the leading U.S. biotech hub. "This is the basis of a whole new field of medicine," said Dan Perry, executive director of the Alliance for Aging Research.

Dr. Thomas Okarma, CEO of Geron Corp., a biotech firm in Menlo Park, said policy can't stop the science. "Despite government restrictions, this work is going to go on and it's going to be successful," he said.