

June 29, 2004

Stem cells

- Lets doctors decide

LAST week, an alliance of 142 scientific societies, universities and patient groups begged the Bush administration to ease the stranglehold it imposed on stem cell research to please religious conservatives.

Calling itself the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, the scientific group said President Bush's policy stifles hope for many disease sufferers. CAMR leader Daniel Parry commented:

“In the past three years since the policy was announced, more than 4 million Americans have died from diseases that embryonic stem cell research has the potential to help. We just can't afford to wait any longer.”

The death of former President Reagan from Alzheimer's disease — one of many ills that might be cured by stem cells — boosted support for faster research. Former first lady Nancy Reagan has joined the demand.

Early this month, 58 U.S. senators signed a letter urging President Bush to reconsider his restrictions. In April, 206 House members did likewise. A recent poll found that three-fourths of Americans approve of stem cell research.

Stem cells are rudimentary units that haven't yet differentiated into muscle, bone, hair, skin, nerve or other tissue. They have a remarkable ability to become whatever tissue they're placed amid. Thus scientists hope they can be used to grow new heart muscle in cardiac patients, brain matter in Alzheimer's sufferers, pancreas tissue in diabetics, spinal tissue in paraplegics, etc.

The best source of stem cells is from human eggs that have been fertilized in fertility clinics and allowed to multiply a few times into embryos. In such clinics, excess eggs are discarded and wasted — but using them for medical treatment would be a bonus.

However, some churches contend that a soul is created each time a sperm fertilizes an egg, thus they think it is murder to destroy the excess embryos to obtain their stem cells. President Bush and the Republican Party tend to support this “religious right” view. Bush banned federal funding of research using stem cells from newly created embryos.

Disgusted, Bernard Siegel of the Genetics Policy Institute complained: “It's a potential

medical breakthrough, and Chicken Littles are running around, trying to scare the public about it. ... We can't go back to the Dark Ages where every medical advance is stymied."

Scientific American noted that "Bush unceremoniously replaced two advocates of human embryonic stem cell research on his advisory Council on Bioethics with individuals more likely to give him a hallelujah chorus of opposition to it."

We think medical research should be left to scientists. Politicians and preachers should stay out of matters they know little about.