

Posted on Tue, Jul. 13, 2004

## MEDICAL RESEARCH

Republicans split on stem cell use  
**The death of former President Ronald Reagan has reignited the debate over embryonic stem cell research.**

**BY MARC CAPUTO AND BETH REINHARD**  
[mcaputo@herald.com](mailto:mcaputo@herald.com)

Amid an ethical debate splintering pro-life Republicans, Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Peter Deutsch called for more embryonic stem cell research Monday in a bill that pays homage to GOP icon Ronald Reagan.

Deutsch, a congressman representing South Florida, said the bill, which would end a 3-year-old ban on federal funding for the research, would help find cures for devastating conditions like Alzheimer's disease, diabetes and paralysis. Scientists say they can extract stem cells from unused embryos and grow them into healthy cells, and perhaps even organs.

The science, however, troubles President Bush and pro-life conservatives who wince at spending tax dollars on what they see as the destruction of human life. Mel Martinez, Bush's former housing secretary and a White House favorite in Florida's Senate race, said he supports the ban on federal funding.

On the other side is the Republican Senate race's front-runner, Bill McCollum. He's part of a growing list of conservatives who are modifying their pro-life stance in favor of the rosy hopes of science.

"There is no question that limitations on stem cell research are having an adverse effect," Deutsch said Monday, standing between a woman in a wheelchair and a man in



SPEAKING OUT: Sabrina Cohen, 26, paralyzed in a car accident 14 years ago, vocalizes her support for a stem cell research bill, along with U.S. Senate candidate Peter Deutsch. MARIANNE ARMISHAW/FOR THE HERALD

a white lab coat during a press conference at Aventura Hospital and Medical Center.

## **TIMING'S EVERYTHING**

Deutsch's proposal may be better timed than a similar plan he introduced in 2001. The death last month of former President Ronald Reagan, who suffered from Alzheimer's, has rekindled interest in stem cell research. Former first lady Nancy Reagan is an advocate.

Hoping to capitalize on the late Republican president's popularity, the fairly liberal Deutsch wants to name a federal health office to coordinate stem cell research after the father of modern-day conservatism. The cutting-edge research makes for strange bedfellows. Conservative Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah recently urged Bush, along with 57 of his colleagues, to expand stem cell research.

All of Deutsch's Democratic opponents in the Senate race -- former state education commissioner Betty Castor, Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas and Hollywood businessman Bernard Klein -- support expanding stem cell research. In the Republican field, outgoing House Speaker Johnnie Byrd opposes the legislation, while Coral Gables businessman Doug Gallagher backs it. Gallagher was among the first to crusade for stem cell research.

The growing support among Republicans is particularly troubling to groups such as Florida Right to Life. Spokeswoman Lynda Bell said that scientific hopes have put the pro-life movement in a "tough" spot, and she fears that its core message -- that life begins at conception -- is in danger of being diluted in Reagan's name.

"This is so disingenuous. It's political opportunism," Bell said. "This is an attempt to simply justify something that's unjustifiable. To use someone's name dedicated to the sanctity of human life -- only to destroy it -- is absolutely wrong."

## **ORIGINS**

Most stem cells were initially created at in-vitro fertilization clinics across the nation. At these clinics, doctors routinely create multiple embryos to help couples have all the children they want. The result: thousands of leftover embryos in cold storage. These are sometimes thrown away. Under Bush's ban, they can't be used for federally funded experiments.

Scientists who don't rely on the government can grow the embryos -- blobs of cells, smaller than the head of a pin -- in the lab for a few days. They then remove the stem cells, destroying the embryo. The stem cells can then be grown and studied indefinitely in the lab.

In an interview last month, Martinez said he could understand the promises of the research, but not the destruction of life.

McCollum said his pro-life stance is broader.

"I think appropriate funding for embryonic stem cell research is a pro-life position," McCollum said. "It conforms completely with my faith and my belief in the unborn and my belief of when life begins. And I'm one with my conscience and with my Lord."