

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

PUBLIC LIVES

The Slippery Intersection of Medicine and Politics

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Published: July 27, 2004

WHEN Ron Reagan Jr. speaks tonight at the Democratic National Convention on loosening restrictions on stem cell research, few people will be as glued to the television set as Dr. Gerald D. Fischbach. He is the executive vice president for health and biomedical sciences and dean of the faculty of medicine of the Columbia University Medical Center.

His title is a mouthful, and he has even more lofty-sounding ones, so many that he cannot fit them all onto his business card.



Dr. Fischbach is Columbia's health czar, and he has carried on his own campaign to promote the value of stem cell research. He has testified repeatedly before Congress, moderated a recent United Nations conference on stem cells and cloning, and signed a letter with other scientists criticizing the Bush administration for ignoring the advice of scientific experts.

He speaks of "a fundamentalist streak" in the administration's stem cell policy, and feels passionately that science should not be ruled by politics. "It drives me nuts," he said on a recent morning in his large, airy office on West 168th Street.

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Dr. Gerald D. Fischbach

"When you begin arguments based on convictions and not open to scientific discourse, the whole process starts to crumble, and that worries me, not only with stem cells but in the whole sphere of scientific inquiry," he says.

"It gets to a very complex issue of regulation of science. Scientists have to be able to do unfettered research, as long as it is in the boundaries of societal mores. And right now, and I think Ron Reagan is concerned about it, there are more and more regulations of science for political reasons.

"I think it is very threatening. I think it is as threatening as any time in my lifetime, including the McCarthy era," he says.

People listen when Dr. Fischbach talks. He oversees Columbia's schools of medicine, public health, nursing and dentistry, with more than 5,000 faculty members and a \$1.2 billion research budget. He also leads 75 departments and institutes, some of which are larger than most hospitals. He arrived at Columbia three years ago after directing the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke at the National Institutes of Health.

But let's face it: the 65-year-old dean, who is balding and soft-spoken with a lecturely, even cautious, manner, doesn't quite have the political frisson of Ron Reagan, the younger son of the late Republican president, whose family has criticized President Bush's policy of limiting financing on stem cell research.

"It's very hard to get the country's ear," Dr. Fischbach says. "Ron Reagan has an extraordinary opportunity."

Mr. Reagan's prime-time speech is expected to draw attention to a debate that is one of the prickliest in science and politics. Scientists believe stem cells, which can give rise to all other cells and tissues in the body, could yield treatments for diseases like Parkinson's, diabetes, and perhaps, Alzheimer's, which former President Reagan had. To cultivate the cell lines necessary for research, human embryos have to be destroyed, which draws criticism from religious conservatives and those who oppose abortion.

Dr. Fischbach recalls Mr. Bush's first major speech, on Aug. 9, 2001, in which the president said he would permit taxpayer financing for stem-cell research so long as the studies involved only those stem-cell lines already in existence at that time. The president said he did not want to encourage the destruction of any more embryos.

"I just think you cannot do science with one hand tied behind your back," Dr. Fischbach says. "You have to use every tool, every lead."

When asked about the political thicket of the stem cell debate, he looks uncomfortable. He is careful with his words. He says he does not see the issue as political.

Dr. Fischbach adds that he doesn't know whether Mr. Reagan should speak at the convention. "It's a political position. I don't want to advocate politics. It's tough but I also don't want to speak against it."

Dr. Fischbach, by the way, is a registered Democrat. He voted for Al Gore in the last presidential election.

ON this day, he scribbles drawings of cells and embryos on a legal pad to explain his points. A neurobiologist, he has researched the early development and survival of nerve cells, and how they communicate with each other.

Before his appointment at the N. I. H., he was a professor of neurobiology and chairman of the neurobiology departments at the Harvard Medical School and at Massachusetts General Hospital.

He is married to Dr. Ruth L. Fischbach, director of Columbia's Center for Bioethics. They met at Cornell when she was in nursing school and he was a medical student. The couple, who live on the Upper West Side, have four grown children.

Dr. Fischbach was raised in Mount Vernon, N.Y., the son of an immigration lawyer and a real estate broker. As a Columbia dean, he is self-effacing about his attributes. He would not describe himself as an efficient administrator. But he says he can be creative at solving problems, creating things. Speaking of which, he is forming the Columbia Neuroscience Institute, a multi-million dollar research center that will bring together the university's brain research labs and have stem-cell research as one focus.

Despite his laments, Dr. Fischbach is optimistic.

"It's hard to stop science," he says. "The first breakthrough, the first patient that really benefits from stem cell therapy, will change everything. It will be irresistible in terms of public demand and recognition."