

Campaign launched to earmark state money for stem cell, cloning research

Organizers hope initiative can be placed on ballot in fall of 2006.

By Josh Hafenbrack
Staff Writer

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A group called Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures launched a California-style initiative Monday, with its leaders pledging to seek taxpayer money not only for research on embryos, but also for therapeutic cloning.

The group is starting a statewide campaign to raise \$1.5 million, said founder Burt Aaronson, a Palm Beach County commissioner. The money would be used to collect the 611,000 signatures needed to put the constitutional amendment before voters in the September 2006 gubernatorial primaries.

Florida stem cell research funding is about economics as well as health, supporters said. Florida could compete with states such as California, which approved a \$3 billion stem cell initiative in 2004 by a landslide, Aaronson said.

"Whether it's Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or cancer, we should be doing everything we possibly can to look for the answers, for the solutions," said state Sen. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton.

Florida's \$11.3 billion tobacco settlement in 1997 could be a potential funding source for the research, Aaronson said. No dollar amount has been determined.

But Monday, some Democrats questioned whether the therapeutic cloning provision would be palatable in Florida, given the state's conservative makeup.

"Cloning is very scary," said Rep. Eleanor Sobel, D-Hollywood. "I think we should stick with embryonic stem cell research."

Supporters, however, said therapeutic cloning is critical because it allows scientists to create embryonic cells that can be used in research.

Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures still lacks money or a Web site. The group also appears, for now, to be left-leaning: No Republican politicians were present at Monday's news conference, while three Democratic statehouse representatives were there.

"I know we'll have support from many Republicans," Aaronson said. Still, the effort was portrayed Monday as an end-run on the Republican-controlled Legislature.

"Let's face it," said Genetics Policy Institute President Bernard Siegel. "The Legislature is not going to move forward in this direction."



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Gov. Jeb Bush opposes state funding of embryonic stem cell research, citing an objection to destroying embryos that he says represent human life.

Religious groups also are sure to fight embryonic stem cell research.

"Clearly, embryonic stem cell research does necessitate the destruction of a living, developing human being," said Florida Catholic Conference health director Michael Sheedy. In contrast, he said, adult stem cells and umbilical cord stem cells are promising and don't pose ethical quandaries. "The cures are coming, but without the destruction of embryos," he said.

The stem cell debate is rippling across the country, with Connecticut and Illinois setting aside stem cell funds this year. State initiatives have taken on added importance with President Bush vowing to veto any expansion in federal funding of embryonic stem cell research.

"Why not Florida [as] the first state in the South to fund stem cell research?" Aaronson said.

In addition to embryos, therapeutic cloning is critical to finding cures for a variety of diseases, said Siegel, whose Genetics Policy Institute recently moved from Miami to Wellington.

Therapeutic cloning removes the nucleus of an unfertilized egg cell and replaces it with another cell. This process was the basis for cloning Dolly the sheep, the first mammal cloned from an adult cell.

In the amendment, therapeutic cloning would be called by its scientific name -- "somatic cell nuclear transfer" -- Siegel said. The amendment would ban human reproductive cloning, he said.

But state Sen. Dave Aaronberg, D-Greenacres, said including therapeutic cloning jeopardizes the research with embryos, which is popular in opinion polls. "The word `cloning' should not be in there," he said.

The stem cell research issue has moved to the forefront locally with The Scripps Research Institute opening a Palm Beach County branch, promising a biomedical boom in South Florida. Scripps does not work with embryos, but other biomedical companies might want to, Aaronson said.

"We can see the impact of this in our lifetime, certainly in our children's lifetimes," said Siegel, a former lawyer in Coral Gables. "These are cells in a petri dish; they're the seeds of life. They offer so much promise."

The initiative group also found a potential face at Monday's news conference: Adam Susser, 5, who was-born blind and a paraplegic. His parents have flown him to Mexico for umbilical cord stem cell treatments. Within months, he gained some vision, said his father, Gary.

"Wouldn't it be nice if I could have [stem cell treatments] in my own back yard, instead of flying to Mexico?" Susser asked.

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