

Let's not shut our minds to stem cell research

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Palm Beach columnist

July 24, 2005

When Burt Aaronson talks to audiences these days, he's likely to ask for a show of hands.

"How many people here know someone who's had cancer? Or heart disease? Or diabetes?" he'll ask.

"How many have a relative who's had one of these? Or a friend? Or an enemy?"

He says the result is the same every time.

"Every hand goes up," he says.

That is the strongest argument for the ballot effort that's meant to put Florida in the business of funding embryonic stem cell research -- research that Gov. Jeb Bush has said he'll never allow.

Simply put: Can we afford to shut our minds to new knowledge that holds the potential for staggering medical advances?

Aaronson, the Palm Beach County commissioner, recently founded Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures to push a constitutional amendment onto the ballot next year.

If it were up to the just three big counties in South Florida, it would win hands down.

But throw in the rest of the state, where social conservatives surely will battle in defense of helpless embryos, and I'm thinking the outcome is anybody's guess.

The Christian right has held the upper hand in this debate since August 2001, when President Bush sharply curtailed federally funded embryonic stem cell research on right-to-life grounds

His brother, Jeb Bush, echoed that last month at the Biotechnology Industry Organization conference in Philadelphia. The governor was up there to crow about The Scripps Research Institute and Florida's arrival in the biotech big-time.

How? By telling reporters he's against a major new branch of research.

"Taking a human life to save life is a huge contradiction morally," he said.

I admit I'm no theologian. But it seems to me quite a stretch to call it "taking a human life" when you're dealing with cells in a petri dish that never will be in a womb.

Imagine this, says Bernard Siegel, the Wellington-based president of the Genetics Policy Institute, an advocacy group:



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You take an ordinary skin cell from a patient, one of 100 trillion body cells. You put it in an unfertilized egg, with nucleus removed, and give it a small electric shock. The cell divides and takes on embryonic properties. From there it can produce any tissue in the body.

"Imagine," Siegel continues, "You can take someone who is paralyzed and regenerate nerve cells to repair a spinal cord."

This is the promise of so-called therapeutic cloning. Despite the scary name, it's far from the reproductive cloning of human beings.

Siegel, a big backer of the ballot initiative, doesn't know of any statewide polls on stem cell issues.

But nationally, 56 percent of Americans approve of embryonic stem cell research, according to a CBS News poll taken 10 days ago.

And in the House and Senate, members of both parties are working on bills to reverse President Bush's restrictions.

Last year, California voters overwhelmingly passed a referendum to spend \$3 billion on embryonic stem cell research over 10 years.

New Jersey, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Maryland, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut also are making moves to fund such research.

Notice a pattern?

These are all blue states.

Florida, you might remember, has been in the red column for the last two presidential elections.

In our closely split state, Aaronson's initiative should trigger one heck of a fight.

According to Siegel, the more that people learn the facts, the more they favor the research.

I hope he's right.

On this extremely polarizing subject, we'll hear many impassioned Floridians talking about the right to life.

Let's hope we hear from even more about a right to life without the pain and anguish of Alzheimer's, Lou Gehrig's and Parkinson's diseases; spinal-cord injuries, and AIDS.

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