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Group urges \$200 million for stem-cell research

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WEST PALM BEACH — Florida would give \$200 million over 10 years to human embryonic stem-cell research under a constitutional amendment proposal drafted by Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures.

The proposal's language, released Wednesday, is designed to avoid the pitfalls that have beset California's \$3 billion stem-cell initiative, which passed in late 2004 but has yet to be financed. It would put the Florida Department of Health in charge of issuing money to qualified scientists and would issue the grants only to nonprofit research institutions.



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Palm Beach County Commissioner Burt Aaronson, who launched the group, hopes to put the measure on the ballot in time for the November 2006 election. To do that, he will have to gather 611,000 signatures from registered voters by Dec. 31.

Embryonic stem cells are controversial because of their origin: In most cases, they are the leftovers from fertility clinics, allowed to grow in culture a few days beyond fertilization.

Scientists believe they have the potential to become almost any type of cell. They are working to coax such cells into nerve, heart and pancreatic tissue, potentially to treat spinal cord injuries, heart attacks and diabetes, among many other diseases.

Stem-cell cures may not come in his lifetime, Aaronson said, but he believes that they will come eventually.

"This is what I want to be remembered for, more than anything else," Aaronson said.

Signature gathering will begin immediately, Aaronson said. But it won't be an easy task.

Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures didn't exist before July, and it doesn't yet have the money to pay a firm to collect signatures, although organizers say 200 people have volunteered to help. Aaronson said he thinks the group will need about \$2 million to get the language on the ballot, then substantially more to defend it from political opposition.

If the measure does make the ballot, it promises to make stem-cell research a flaming hot issue in the next race for governor. Candidates are expected to split along party lines; Gov. Jeb Bush, a Republican who is term-limited, stated his opposition in June to putting any public money into a technology that "takes a life to give one."

Bernard Siegel, vice chairman of Floridians for Stem Cell Research, said the group turned to Harvard Medical School ethicist and lawyer Louis M. Guenin to craft the language.

The goal was to create something ethically beyond reproach, Guenin said.

To do that, it states that the only embryos used will be those donated by women who specify that they not be implanted in their wombs or any other woman's.

With such a restriction, backers say, there's no quandary over what the embryos might have become. Using them to treat a sick person becomes morally preferable to allowing them to be discarded, he said.

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"The boundaries of what's morally permissible become the boundaries of what's funded," Guenin said.

The language was designed to withstand political controversy, too, Siegel said.

It says the measure is to become effective right away, without requiring action from the Florida Legislature. It draws money straight out of the general fund. It is less than two pages, and straightforward enough to pass muster with the Florida Supreme Court, which must sign off on amendments to the state constitution, Siegel said. It also strives to avoid the issues that have prevented California from obtaining bonds to finance its \$3 billion stem-cell initiative.

"The California initiative is a lesson in how not to do this," Guenin said. "The California amendment was 30 pages and loaded with all sorts of problems that I've tried to avoid here."

The Florida amendment would require that only nonprofit universities and institutes receive the money. In California, businesses have a chance to win grants.

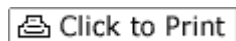
The Florida initiative would prohibit conflicts of interest from the members of the grant-making board. In California, top officials from the grant-seeking universities and institutes are the ones deciding how the money is distributed.

Still, the California group has managed to issue its first grants, because of private support. On Sept. 9, the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine announced that scientists at 16 institutions would share \$12.5 million a year for three years to launch a stem-cell training program.

The Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, Calif., will receive \$1.06 million during three years to train three scientists in stem-cell science.

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