

Boca figures to square off with dueling stem cell amendments

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by [By John Johnston](#)

A national, if not international spotlight will soon shine on Boca Raton. It will focus on two sides of a highly controversial question; on one side morality and religion, and on the other side saving lives and finding cures.

Boca Raton knows both of the people seeking to test voter support for one or the other set of beliefs. Both now must obtain more than 611,000 signatures each to put the competing constitutional amendments on the 2006 State ballot.

Palm Beach County Commissioner Burt Aaronson, and whose District 5 includes a portion of Boca Raton, several months ago announced plans to seek a constitutional amendment for \$200 million in state funding to fund embryonic stem cell research.

Boca Raton mortgage broker, Eucharistic minister and media personality Susan Cutaia heard Aaronson loud and clear, and last week filed paperwork, also seeking a constitutional amendment, but this one preventing the use of state funding for embryonic stem cell research.

The 76-year old Aaronson in fact wants his political legacy to be known as the father of publicly financed embryonic stem cell research in the Florida — a proposal whose controversy focuses on the right-to-life debate.

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

“And as far as the ethics of this are concerned, was it ethical to go to Iraq on false pretenses?” he asked. “Is it ethical to go over there and kill people so that, theoretically, we’re saving people here? Tell me – what’s the difference?” he said, adding:

“And is it ethical not to try to restore human dignity,” through the use of this research “to make people walk again?”

Aaronson said flatly: “An embryo is not a life – and I’m interested in saving lives.”

Sides Form

Assisted by Wellington lawyer Bernard Siegel, the men formed Floridians for Stem Cell Research (FSCR) earlier this year. Siegel, vice chairman of FSCR, said he contacted Aaronson when the commissioner announced he was committed to getting the amendment passed after hearing Gov. Jeb Bush say he would not allow tax dollars to be used for stem cell research.

Cutaia, in turn, has formed Citizens for Science and Ethics, Inc. “CSE is seeking to

establish an ethical framework for state-funded research here in Florida,” she said. “We view this ballot initiative as a perfect compromise that allows public funding to pursue promising research while at the same time creating a standard that does not disenfranchise the many taxpayers of this state who find some forms of experimentation unethical.”

Cutaia said that “the promise of stem cell research can be reached through adult stem cells, umbilical cord blood stem cells, and placental- derived stem cells.”

She said the amendment CSE seeks does not preclude private or federal funding for any form of research. She says CSE is concerned about a different matter, and that is “forcing Florida’s taxpayers to pay for something that many find ethically problematic.”

The substance of Cutaia’s amendment: “No revenue of the state shall be spent on experimentation that involves the destruction of a live human embryo.” Lawyers at Ausley & McMullen in Tallahassee drafted it.

In turn, the Aaronson’s group has turned to Harvard Medical School lawyer and ethicist Louis M. Guenin to draft the language of his ballot measure.

Aaronson’s amendment in summary: The Department of Health would receive \$20 million per year, for 10 consecutive years. Those monies in turn would be used for embryonic stem cell research “using, or using the derivatives of, human embryos that, before or after formation, have been donated to medicine under donor instructions forbidding intrauterine embryo transfer.” Aaronson’s amendment would also forbid use of the money except by non-profit research institutions. Recipients would be chosen “by scientific merit as reckoned in a peer review process by disinterested experts in the relevant fields.”

Governor Jeb Bush is opposed to public funding of embryonic stem cell research. The governor said in June that he opposes human embryonic stem cell research because it requires the destruction of days-old embryos.

“I’m opposed to it,” the governor said. “Taking a human life to save life is a huge contradiction morally.”

In 2001, the governor’s brother, President George W. Bush, banned federal funding for stem cell research except for already existing cell lines, but private groups are funding some new research, and Congress is debating the question.

Scripps

The Scripps biotech research facility broke ground last Friday, just west of Palm Beach Gardens.

“What better place to ask for stem cell research than the state of Florida, especially since we’re bringing Scripps here and other research companies?” Aaronson asks, adding:

“Why tie their hands behind their back, or certainly tie one hand behind their back?”

The Scripps Research Institute does not use embryonic stem cells and has no plans to do so in Palm Beach County. However, the institute works with mouse stem cells and human adult stem cells.

“We’re not using embryonic stem cells, but we never say never,” Scripps spokesman Keith McKeown said. “Obviously if science were to go in that direction, we could rethink that.”

And if Cutaia has her way, the point will be moot in Florida – at least with using public money.

### County Supports

In the meantime, a recent resolution approved by Palm Beach County Commissioners said:

- “We support embryonic stem cell research in the State of Florida.
- “We oppose any state of federal legislation or administrative action that would have the effect of slowing of banning research in this area.
- “We support state and federal funding that will enable embryonic stem cell research to move forward rapidly and ensure public access to such advances.”

Commissioner Mary McCarty was the lone dissenting vote. She said she was not opposed to embryonic stem cell research; only that public money shouldn’t be used to fund it.

John Johnston can be reached at 561-549-0833, or at [jjohnston@bocanews.com](mailto:jjohnston@bocanews.com)