



Stem Cell Research

Objective

- Communicate the University's support of an expanded federal policy for funding embryonic stem cell research.

Background

In August 2001, President Bush made his first televised speech to the nation as he laid out his policy for federal funding of stem cell research. The President announced his decision to allow federal funding on a limited number of already existing human embryonic stem cell lines. Since that time, the number of cells thought to be available and viable for research has shrunk from 78 to less than 20. Some reasons for that change include that many of the originally-designated cells are in other countries where we have not been able to negotiate material transfer agreements and that some of the original cell lines are not adequately robust.

In addition to being few and far between, the federally-designated stem cell lines have been grown with mouse feeder cells to help to foster the development of the human embryonic stem cells. These cells would not be fit for human therapies. Research breakthroughs in human embryonic stem cell work since August 2001 have led scientists to develop new stem cell lines without the mouse feeder cells. Yet, these new lines – clean of mouse traces – are not available to federally funded researchers since they were not part of the approved cell lines.

Current Political Environment

Congress

Although Rep. Millender-McDonald (D-Los Angeles) introduced HR 3960, The Stem Cell Replenishment Act, in March, Congressional committees have not acted on any legislation on stem cell research thus far this year.

However, the Congress recently took action on this subject when the House and the Senate each sent a bi-partisan letter to President Bush urging him to expand his embryonic stem cell research policy. The House letter garnered 206 signatures from the 435 Representatives and the Senate letter yielded 58 signers, a strong majority of that body. Both letters ask the President to consider what the scientific community has learned since his pronouncement in August 2001 and to expand the policy so that research in this field can grow.

Californians took lead roles in both letters: Representatives Duke Cunningham (R-San Diego) and Cal Dooley (D-Fresno) were two of the four Members of Congress who initiated the House letter. (Reps. Mike Castle (R-DE) and Diana DeGette (D-CO) were the other two.) Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) was among the leaders of the Senate letter along with Senators Specter (R-PA), Harkin (D-IA), Hatch (R-UT) and Kennedy (D-MA). Senator Barbara Boxer was an early signer of the Senate letter.

Signers of the House letter include 39 of our 53 Californians – all the California Democrats except Zoe Lofgren (who wrote her own letter), as well as Republicans Jerry Lewis (Redlands), Bill Thomas (Bakersfield), Dana Rohrabacher

(Huntington Beach), Ken Calvert (Riverside), Doug Ose (Sacramento), and Mary Bono (Palm Springs). The support of several of the California Republicans who signed the letter received notice from media and the broad university and research community, both because of their leadership positions in the House and because of their traditionally more conservative positions on such matters.

UC FGR worked closely with campus GRRs to encourage California members to sign the letter. UC input helped convince several Members to show their support of stem cell research – some for the first time publicly – through the letter.

The Reagan Factor

There is much speculation over what impact former President Ronald Reagan's passing might have on the Administration and/or Congress with respect to federal policy governing embryonic stem cell research. Over the past few years, Nancy Reagan has quietly weighed in with key Republicans in support of this research. In May of this year, at a Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation gala in Beverly Hills, Mrs. Reagan advocated publicly for stem cell research:

And now science has presented us with a hope called stem cell research, which may provide our scientists with answers that have so long been beyond our grasps. I just don't see how we can turn our backs on this-- there are so many diseases that can be cured, or at least helped. We have lost so much time already, and I just really can't bear to lose anymore.

The past week has been replete with tributes to President Reagan including the introduction of a bill, HR 4531, the Ronald Reagan Memorial Stem Cell Research Act of 2004 (sponsored by Gary Ackerman, a New York Democrat), and many statements urging a broader policy. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) commented on news shows this week that he would lead the effort to re-examine the current policy.

It is unlikely that any of these efforts will affect a real change before the November election.