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Stem cell fight ahead

Despite Obama's election, obstacles to progress remain

By Bernard Siegel

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During the George W. Bush years, stem cell advocates fought an uphill battle to expand funding opportunities and engage the National Institutes of Health in this potentially lifesaving research. The political climate improved drastically with the election of President Barack Obama, who lifted the Bush-era restrictions by executive order and freed the NIH to do its job in providing comprehensive guidelines for human embryonic stem cell research.

In the long run, these actions will add much-needed funding for this basic research. But there is still heavy lifting to be done on the advocacy front.

For years, the social-conservative movement, especially its political leadership, sought to hijack embryonic stem cell research into the intractable abortion debate in the United States. They dreamed up the Draconian "Brownback bill," which called for imprisonment and heavy fines for researchers engaged in forms of legitimate stem cell research - and even paralyzed patients availing themselves of a potential treatment abroad.

This led in turn to the rise of a "pro-cures movement," representing the great majority of citizens who see stem cell research not as a question of public policy but as a personal health matter, with life and death consequences for themselves and their loved ones.

2009 finds the social conservative agenda for embryonic stem cell research in tatters. Broad public support for this potentially lifesaving field has resulted in some big victories. California's far-reaching Proposition 71, for example, created the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine. With a \$3 billion commitment, California became the world leader in funding this fundamental research. Missouri and Michigan voted for ballot measures that protect embryonic stem cell research in their state constitutions.

The Maryland Stem Cell Research Fund is a model for other states in funding all aspects of stem cell research. Supporters in Congress will soon file bills seeking to make permanent and perhaps expand Mr. Obama's executive order. Stem cell advocates should expect pitched battles and be ready to support this legislation.

It is unlikely that a new version of the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act (twice vetoed by President Bush) will address a piece of legislation - a perennial rider called the Dickey-Wicker Amendment - that prohibits NIH funding to directly derive new cell lines. The amendment usually passes without debate as part of the appropriations bill for Health and Human Services. To streamline the research and end all doubt on federal support, Dickey-Wicker must go.

Brutal state-by-state battles will continue. A single state senator this year almost derailed all embryonic stem cell research in Texas. Oklahoma Gov. Brad Henry heroically vetoed a total embryonic stem cell research ban. As these fights persist, advocates must stay focused to combat creative and increasingly desperate foes.

But there are larger issues. Embryonic stem cell research is only one aspect of the field of regenerative medicine. Advocates must be educated about the long, winding and expensive path to move basic discoveries through the regulatory process to treatments. Effective treatments will not happen without a robust business community. The nascent "regen industry" seeks a sensible regulatory climate, balanced intellectual property landscape, resolution on issues relating to reimbursements and health insurance for novel cell therapies, well-defined international standards and clear direction on the use of embryo-derived cells. Advocates, scientists and business must unite in a common cause.

The World Stem Cell Summit that opens in Baltimore Monday brings the stakeholders together. One attendee will be Josh Basile, a University of Maryland student from Potomac who was paralyzed in an accident. He is among the 3,500 students on 20 campuses involved in the stem cell advocacy movement. "If these cells are given a chance to do what they potentially can do ..." he says. "I am doing 25 hours of exercise a week to keep my body healthy so one day I can meet science halfway."

Mr. Basile and the other summit attendees recognize the promise of stem cells and the need for a funding and regulatory framework that will support basic research and remove unreasonable legal roadblocks. By working together, they can chart the future of regenerative medicine, create the momentum necessary to propel scientific discoveries to applicable therapies and help turn hope into reality.

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