

Posted on Wed, Jan. 31, 2007

Crist: Pay for stem cell studies, but not new embryonic research

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - Gov. Charlie Crist said Wednesday he will recommend that lawmakers spend state money for stem cell research, but only research that doesn't require the destruction of embryos.

Crist said he would recommend spending \$20 million for a grant program to pay for studies that use cells culled from adults, umbilical cord blood and amniotic fluid donated by pregnant women.

But he won't recommend paying for the most controversial - and many say most promising - type of research on embryonic stem cells. Crist said he stopped short of asking for state money for that because too many people - including state lawmakers - oppose destroying embryos, which is required to do the studies. Some say the frozen embryos, created outside the womb for in vitro fertilization, are human life that should be protected.

Crist, a Republican, formally announced the plan after a quick tour of a Tampa brain research lab that will soon open at the University of South Florida's School of Medicine. Crist said he would support an initiative to use embryonic stem cells in research, but wants to begin with a proposal everyone can support.

"We've got to start somewhere," Crist said of the non-embryonic stem cell research that would be funded under his proposal. "I'm looking forward to seeing what this first \$20 million can do."

The Bush administration in 2001 restricted federal spending on embryonic stem cell research, but New Jersey, California, Connecticut, Illinois and Maryland provide state funds in the field.

Conservative groups cheered Crist's announcement.

"Stem cell research can be done ethically without the destruction of a living human embryo and the governor should be praised for his stand, which both advances medical research and protects the sanctity of life," said John Stemberger, president of the Florida Family Policy Council.

Some stem cell researchers also praised the proposal as important, even if it doesn't pay for embryonic research.

"It's a great step forward," said Dr. Christopher Cogle, a stem cell researcher and bone marrow transplant doctor at the University of Florida. "This proposal launches us further into the realm of the most progressive states in funding regenerative medicine."

But others in the field pointed out that putting \$20 million of state money into non-embryonic research doesn't do much because the federal government spends hundreds of millions already.

"It doesn't meet the unmet need," said Bernard Siegel, director of the Genetics Policy Institute in Wellington. "It provides very limited funding for something the federal government already funds. If Florida's going to take the lead in this we're going to have to be much more assertive."

Siegel and others are pushing a constitutional amendment that would require the state to appropriate \$200 million over 10 years to pay for embryonic stem cell research. A competing amendment is also being proposed that would prohibit any state money going to "experimentation that involves the destruction of a live human embryo."

Two competing bills will be considered by lawmakers this year. One to be filed by Rep. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, will mirror Crist's proposal.

Another, filed by Rep. Franklin Sands, D-Weston, calls for spending \$20 million on research that would include embryonic stem cell studies.

"We're leaving behind the most promising form of research," Sands said of Crist's proposal. "Because some lawmakers don't go along, you just give up? That's sad."

Senate Democratic Leader Steve Geller who is pushing for money for embryonic stem cell research and sponsoring the Senate version of Sands' bill, expressed dismay at Crist's proposal - but hope that he will expand it to include embryonic studies.

"Gov. Crist very clearly has said he was in favor of embryonic stem cell research," said Geller, D-Cooper City. But now, he said, the governor "has seen an easy way out" of a showdown with the opponents of the use of embryos.

But Geller and others suggested that Crist still may consider supporting money for embryonic stem cell research on top of the plan to provide money for non-embryonic research.

Geller said Crist told him he was willing to "have further discussions."

Crist has said in the past that he supports embryonic stem cell research - although he has also always said that he would rather see non-embryonic research become more useful so that the issue could be removed from the debate.

"I'm pro-life," Crist said Wednesday. "I'm also pro-good quality of life for people."

Researchers say the embryonic stem cells are promising in medical research because they can become any type of cell in the body. Crist on Wednesday noted new studies that show promise in amniotic stem cells.

Researchers reported earlier this year that the stem cells they drew from amniotic fluid donated by pregnant women hold much the same promise as embryonic stem cells. But they also cautioned that the research was early and that the use of embryonic cells in studies should continue.

Associated Press writer Phil Davis in Tampa contributed to this report.

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