

Crist calls for state to spend \$20 million on stem cell research, but skirts support for embryo use

By Mark Hollis
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TALLAHASSEE -- Gov. Charlie Crist on Wednesday jumped into the raging national debate over stem cell research by calling for unprecedented state spending on the science, so long as it doesn't involve new cells harvested from human embryos.

Crist said he will urge legislators to spend \$20 million in taxpayer money for stem cell research -- a first for Florida -- but only for studies that use cells culled from adults, umbilical cord blood and amniotic fluid donated by pregnant women.

He said he hopes the action will help scientists achieve medical cures for such conditions as diabetes and Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases without setting off a political brawl.

"I know [stem cell research] gives angst to some, particularly when we talk about embryonic stem cells," Crist said at a meeting with reporters and editors in Tallahassee. "I think we can do it in a way that doesn't cause that kind of angst."

Crist's statements immediately landed the Republican governor, less than a month into his administration, in a national controversy that pits embryonic stem cell research proponents against right-to-life advocates.

Reaction was swift from both sides.

Some leading Democrats in the Legislature and prominent South Florida backers of embryonic stem cell research criticized the governor's stance. They said Crist is backing away from a campaign promise to support the most controversial kind of stem cell research, the type that involves destroying human embryos.

"This sort of proposal is more political cover by the governor than anything that will really advance medical research," said Bernard Siegel, a Wellington resident and vice president of Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures, a group backing a state constitutional amendment to fund embryonic stem cell research.

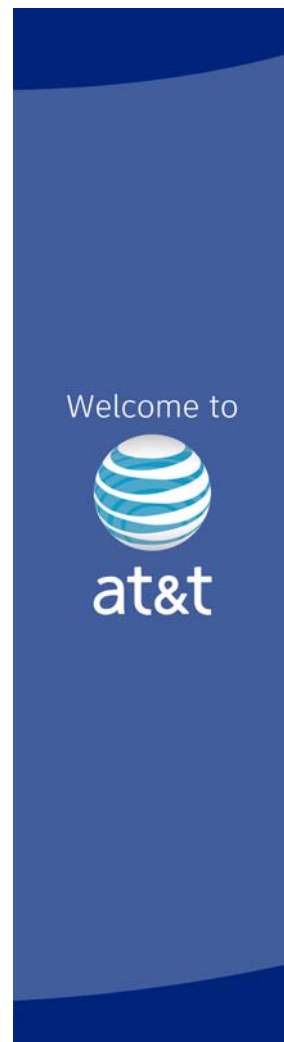
Those backers say research at the University of Florida, the University of Miami and the University of Central Florida would get a shot in the arm if new embryonic stem cell research, now restricted from getting federal funds, were eligible for state money. They say other venues, such as the Scripps Florida Research Institute in Palm Beach County and a Burnham Institute center coming to Orlando, also might be able to host the research.

Critics of embryonic stem cell research, including the Florida Catholic Conference, hailed Crist's move as an ethical compromise. John Stemberger, president of the Orlando-based Florida Family Policy Council, said Crist should be "praised for his stand, which both advances medical research and protects the sanctity of life."

Proponents of embryonic stem cell research contend those cells are promising in medical studies because they have the ability to reproduce into any type of cell in the body. Obtaining the cells requires destroying an embryo, and supporters say embryos can be used that would otherwise be destroyed at fertility clinics.

Crist said new studies show hope for amniotic and other stem cells, and that he wants to avoid a political firestorm over the use of new embryonic stem cells. He said limiting state support to the type of stem cell research that already gets federal funding is the most pragmatic approach.

"I want to do it in a way that we can actually get something done," Crist said. "I don't want to just make a



political statement. I want to make progress."

State Rep. Franklin Sands, a Weston Democrat, and Sen. Steve Geller, D-Hallandale Beach, have filed legislation that would use \$20 million of state funds for stem cell research of all kinds. A competing measure by Rep. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, which Crist likes, would restrict the money to research that doesn't involve human embryos.

"Crist is proposing a half-loaf approach," said Sands. "He has to explain to all those families of people with debilitating diseases that he's trying halfway to save their lives."

Rep. Dan Gelber of Miami Beach, the House Democratic leader, said Crist's proposal is "a nice gesture" but fails to provide the money that's needed to help make Florida a biomedical research capital.

"I understand the governor is trying to achieve the possible," Gelber said. "I think he receded too quickly."

Stem cell battles, like the one Crist was caught in Wednesday, moved to the state level when President Bush froze federal funding for embryonic stem cell research in 2001, restricting it to existing stem-cell lines, and last year cast his first veto against expanding such funding. State legislatures and citizens groups throughout the country are debating measures to underwrite the research with state money instead.

The new Democrat-controlled Congress also has moved to allow federal funding for the research, but it's unclear whether Congress could muster the two-thirds vote required to override a probable presidential veto.

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