

Hadassah brings Stem Cell Summit to Boston

[By Lorne Bell](#) - Tuesday October 2 2007

Discussion over controversial science continues

Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, is co-sponsoring the Stem Cell Summit, which will be held at Hynes Convention Center in Boston on Oct. 2 and 3. The summit is open to the public and will focus on forging useful partnerships between advocacy groups, academia, researchers and businesses.

Featured at the conference will be some of the world's leading stem cell researchers, who will take part in panel discussions as part of an effort to raise awareness of, and build support for, stem cell research.

Leslie Zide, membership development assistant for Hadassah New England, said the organization will send five member representatives to participate in discussions and learn from top researchers in the field. The members will then bring that information to Hadassah's local chapters in the hopes of further engaging members in stem cell advocacy efforts.

"Hadassah has been advocating for stem cell research since 2000," said Zide. "We have the ability, time, and expertise to really go after this issue."

In 2000, the Hadassah University Hospital in Israel teamed with Monash University in Australia and the National University of Singapore to become only the second group in the world to develop human embryonic cell lines. The cells are highly valued by researchers for their ability to mature into almost any type of human cell, including heart cells, pancreatic cells, and skin cells. Many scientists believe embryonic stem cell research holds the key to curing myriad diseases like Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, Multiple Sclerosis, and spinal cord injuries.

"It is common knowledge that the medicine of the future will be based on stem cell-derived treatments," said Dr. Rafi Hofstein, president and CEO of Hadasit, the technology transfer company of the Hadassah Medical Organization in Jerusalem. Hofstein will be a panelist in a summit discussion titled, "The Global Perspective on Stem Cell Research."

"[The Hadassah University Hospital] in Israel is at the forefront of stem cell medical research," Hofstein said. "We believe we are doing the right thing and something of great importance."

Research has been slowed, however, due to a lack of funding for U.S. researchers, according to Hofstein. He said Israeli researchers cannot fully collaborate with their American counterparts because the Bush administration has limited the amount of

funding available through the National Institute of Health.

Stem cell research has been a source of political and religious controversy because embryonic stem cells are obtained from living embryos. Researchers and advocates for stem cell research say the embryos used are obtained from lines that are scheduled to be discarded anyway.

“Our members were very supportive in talking to legislators to urge them to pass the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act,” Zide said, referring to a bill that passed both congressional houses in 2005 and 2006, but was vetoed by President Bush. The bill would have reversed Bush’s 2001 decision that permitted research on only the 60 lines of embryonic stem cells in existence at the time. Scientists contended the lines were contaminated and no longer viable for research.

The Stem Cell Summit, which is co-sponsored by the Genetics Policy Institute, the Harvard Stem Cell Institute and Burrill Life Sciences Media Group, will examine the latest stem cell research, as well as current federal policies, legislation, funding, and legal issues. Panel discussions from some of the world’s top researchers will take place, and U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and former New Hampshire Governor Jeanne Shaheen will also speak at the event.

Needham resident Rebecca Kotkin is one of the five Hadassah member representatives attending the summit next week. Kotkin has been a member of Hadassah for 13 years and has personal reasons for her advocacy of stem cell research.

“My sister has multiple myeloma, a type of blood cancer, and received a stem cell transplant in 2004,” Kotkin said, although she noted that her sister’s transplant did not use the controversial embryonic stem cells. “I believe that this research is the key to curing so many diseases, the limits of which we don’t really yet understand.” Susan Andelman of Boxborough, Mass., will also be in attendance. Andelman has experience in the field of bioinformatics and said she is proud to participate in Hadassah’s advocacy efforts.

“[Stem cell research] is going to change the way medicine is used, helping people live longer and curing diseases that are now considered incurable,” she said. “It’s a shame that more focus isn’t put on the issue now, but it’s great to be a part of the work Hadassah is doing.”