

Supporters, critics of stem cell research argue positions in Boynton debate

By Josh Hafenbrack
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Boynton Beach · They are microscopic cells in a dish, yet to different minds they represent the promise of modern medicine or a dangerous false hope.

To Genetics Policy Institute President Bernie Siegel, embryonic stem cell research provides a chance to cure, or at least understand, disorders from juvenile diabetes to Parkinson's disease.

To Palm Beach County Republican Chairman Sid Dinerstein, taxpayer funding of the research saps money from proven work with adult stem cells and unnecessarily destroys live human embryos.

The two debated Florida funding of embryonic stem cell research Monday at the Hunters Run gated community, as opposing Palm Beach County groups gather signatures for a potential 2008 showdown on the issue in the form of state constitutional amendments.

Dinerstein argued that public money should be focused on work with adult stem cells, citing cases in which people with juvenile diabetes and spinal cord injuries were apparently cured with transplants of the mature cells.

"Every time you people who are so intent on harvesting the embryos speak, you use the word 'potential,'" he said. "We can explore [adult stem cell research] that is working, or we can pursue a political agenda and waste money on things that aren't."

But Siegel noted that embryonic stem cell research is a new field, advanced by scientists in 1998. He said that with public funding, regenerative medicine would "absolutely change the way medicine is practiced within the next two decades."

"Where would we be today if scientists didn't discover antibiotics?" he asked. "We have to work on potential."

The spirited discussion offered a window into opposing sides of a debate playing out nationally and in Florida.

County Commissioner Burt Aaronson's Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures is trying to put before state voters a constitutional amendment that would earmark \$200 million over 10 years for embryonic stem cell research.

On the other side is Citizens for Science and Ethics, pushing an amendment to ban state funding of the research.

The Boca Raton-based groups originally sought to get their measures on the 2006 ballot, but gathering the 611,000 signatures by the Dec. 31 deadline proved unrealistic. They're now aiming for 2008.

Nevertheless, Aaronson said his group is building a statewide organization and already has gathered "tens of thousands" of signatures, although he declined to give a specific number.

He said he's hoping to gather 200,000 signatures to take to the Republican-run Legislature in the spring session, bolstering attempts to fund stem cell research. Democrats are sponsoring bills that would provide \$20 million a year in stem cell funding, but Gov. Jeb Bush opposes those efforts.

"Hopefully, it'll be done legislatively instead of having to go to the constitution," Aaronson said. "But if we have to go to the constitution, we will."

Citizens for Science and Ethics has submitted 15,391 valid signatures in its campaign to prohibit taxpayer-funded embryonic stem cell research, according to the Division of Elections. Founder Susan Cutaia could not be reached for comment despite attempts by phone.

Some people spend.
Some people save.



Monday's forum in Boynton Beach had about 100 retirees in attendance, most supporting embryonic stem cell research.

Irma Schwartz said the research offers at least the chance for a cure to her grandson, who is quadriplegic. Cells from embryos are thought to hold tremendous promise because of their versatility; they can develop into any kind of cell in the body.

"It gives him hope," Schwartz said, "and that's the most important thing."

Dinerstein noted that embryonic stem cell research is "totally legal in America." He said private individuals and organizations that believe in the research should fund it.

"You think when they go out and invent a drug, the federal government pays for it?" he said. "Of course not. This is America. This is free enterprise."

In response, Siegel said the federal government, not drug companies, funds the vast majority of basic research. But since the United States isn't spending money on new embryonic stem cells, other countries such as Israel and South Korea are filling the void.

The debate focused surprisingly little attention on the ethical and religious issues associated with destroying human embryos, a dimension that has framed the national discourse on the issue. Congress is debating expanding embryonic stem cell funding, but President Bush has vowed to veto any attempt to do so on moral grounds.

Dinerstein alluded to "very complex ethical issues" in destroying embryos for research. But alternatives like adult stem cells and umbilical blood render the moral issues moot, he said.

"One could argue all day long about when life begins," he said. "If you don't have to [destroy embryos in research], why would you destroy them?"

Siegel said that while adult stem cells do hold promise, that promise is limited. And far from human life, he said, embryonic stem cells are the leftovers that will be thrown away at in-vitro fertilization clinics.

"These cells in a dish are not a person," Siegel said.

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