

Stem-cell work enters new phase

VCU forum experts say issue changing as 'pro-cures movement' gains ground

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A "pro-cures movement" in the embryonic stem-cell debate is gaining ground as scientific breakthroughs push the issue from politics to consumer issues, advocates said at a Virginia Commonwealth University symposium.

VCU, which is hosting a four-day laboratory workshop for scientists on stem-cell research techniques, held a public symposium Monday on the controversial study of human embryonic stem cells.

Several scientists in engineering, medicine and dentistry at VCU are studying or planning to study federally approved human embryonic stem-cell lines. Much of VCU's work focuses on cell function and control rather than treating specific disease.

Bernard Siegel of the Genetics Policy Institute, a Florida-based advocacy group, and a Richmond native who left his career as a Miami trial attorney to support stem-cell research, spoke at the public symposium. He mentioned the excitement among advocates as word leaked out of a breakthrough in obtaining embryonic stem cells. The research, announced yesterday, could change how people consider the debate, he said. The stem-cell controversy has spawned a pro-cures movement, which is now as much a consumer movement as it is political, Siegel said.

"There is a fear that research, potentially lifesaving research, will be banned," Siegel said. "It becomes a personal health issue, and where it's a personal health issue, that translates to a consumer movement."

He told the audience Monday that all are stakeholders in the debate over stem cells. "This research will have a profound effect on the life of everyone in this room."

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Maryland resident Josh Basile, a paraplegic who has become an advocate for stem-cell research, counts himself among the stakeholders. In 2004, while on summer break from college, he became a paraplegic during an accident at a Delaware beach. He has since started the Determined2heal foundation, which educates the public about spinal-cord injuries, physical rehabilitation issues and stem-cell research.

"It's really about imagining a better future," said Basile, who spoke at the symposium. He said he thinks of stem cells as "superheroes" with the potential to someday restore his health.

Eve Herold, of the Genetics Policy Institute, and Mark Smith, VCU's assistant vice president of government relations and health policy, provided the national and state perspective on stem-cell research and regulation. Smith said Virginia's support for stem-cell research is lukewarm, given that the state legislature has a fund for stem-cell research but has not appropriated tax dollars to support it.

The workshop, which ends today, gives a dozen scientists, post-doctoral researchers and graduate students training in the nuances of the delicate lab work involved in the research, said workshop leader Raj Rao, a VCU stem-cell scientist.

Rao said the Monday symposium for the Richmond community was part of the workshop's effort at public engagement.

"I think it is our duty to keep the public informed of the latest advances in stem-cell research and provide them our honest opinion of the status of the research, challenges and public policy," he said yesterday.

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