

Stem cell furor splits Missourians

As a culturally conservative state argues over a possible vote on embryonic research, a student paralyzed by injury is in the thick of the battle

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- The way Jeff McCaffrey figured it, he would graduate with an officer's commission from the Air Force Academy this spring and immediately prepare to join the fight in Iraq.

"I was ready to go. That's where I felt I belonged," McCaffrey said.

Then came the auto accident, a spinal cord injury and paralysis. Within seconds, McCaffrey's fledgling military career was over.

But the fight--specifically, the opportunity for McCaffrey to join one--survived. Today the 22-year-old college business major is in the thick of an emotionally charged statewide battle over embryonic stem cell research, and the outcome could have national implications.

Quest to create a felony

In culturally conservative Missouri, where the Republican-controlled legislature has been trying for years to make embryonic stem cell research a felony, a coalition of business, research and medical organizations is expected to collect enough signatures to ask voters in November whether Missouri should be the first state to protect such research in the state constitution.

Nationally and in Missouri, poll after poll shows public opposition to human cloning but strong support for embryonic stem cell research aimed at helping potentially millions of people with ailments including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, juvenile diabetes and paralysis.

Politically, all hell has broken loose over the issue in Missouri because the Hatfield and McCoy-type divisions that have defined this state's politics for generations have been effectively blurred. Republicans are split between ardent anti-abortion activists who say this research involves the killing of human embryos and old-line business interests who want to make Kansas City and St. Louis into centers for biomedical research.

McCaffrey, a frontline advocate promoting the ballot proposal for the Missouri Coalition for Lifesaving Cures, embodies from his wheelchair much of what makes this issue non-partisan. He voted for Democrat John Kerry in the 2004 presidential race and conservative Republican Matt Blunt for governor. He is Roman Catholic and opposes abortion.

"I don't see any question about where the moral high ground is here," McCaffrey said during a break between classes at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. "The American people are eager to see where this science might lead."

Perhaps no one is more eager than McCaffrey, who sports a tattoo on his right biceps reading, "Walk. Or Die." If he walks again, he'll have the "Or Die" blocked out.

The clash of morality and potential scientific advancement is at the heart of this fight in a state that is a cauldron of fights over abortion, the right to die and related issues.

The stem cell procedure at issue is known as therapeutic cloning, or somatic cell nuclear transfer, in which the nucleus of an unfertilized egg is removed and replaced with the nucleus of another cell. The cells divide and stem cells are harvested for research.

The evolving debate is laden with thick scientific jargon, but the bottom line for opponents of the research is that those cells are human life and must not be destroyed. For groups including Missouri Right to Life and the Missouri Catholic Conference, it is a natural extension of the abortion battle.

"This involves the destruction of human life in the name of scientific research," said Larry Weber, executive director of the Missouri Catholic Conference. "Missouri's basic moral compass is to err on the side of protecting human life. Missouri isn't California, and voters here won't support this."

Recent polls--one conducted for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the other for the coalition promoting the ballot proposal--indicate that more than 60 percent of Missourians support the measure. It gets its strongest backing from Democrats and independents, but a majority of Republicans also support it. The rural/urban split that historically has divided Missouri is not so evident on this question.

"This cuts across all demographic categories, urban and rural, all across the state, across all parties," said Donn Rubin, chairman of the Missouri Coalition for Lifesaving Cures. "Disease doesn't know political parties or geography."

13 states ponder regulation

The stem cell debate is causing divisions nationally. President Bush, who carried Missouri in the 2004 election, is a staunch opponent of embryonic stem cell research, but Congress has resisted his efforts to place restrictions on it.

Legislatures in 13 states, including Illinois, are considering measures to regulate reproductive and therapeutic cloning, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Fractures within the Republican Party widened two weeks ago when Sen. Jim Talent of Missouri, who is seeking re-election this year, withdrew his name from an anti-cloning bill in the Senate. Talent has not staked a position on the state ballot proposal, and that has infuriated his supporters from anti-abortion groups.

Two of the state's most prominent Republicans--Blunt and former Sen. John Danforth, both opponents of abortion--are supporting the ballot measure. John Hancock, a spokesman for the Missouri Republican Party, downplayed the differences.

"A lot of politicians have wrestled with this, but most of the voters have not," Hancock said.

Although the proposal is not yet guaranteed a spot on the November ballot, even opponents acknowledge the coalition almost certainly will succeed in collecting the 150,000 signatures needed by the May 9 filing deadline.

The ballot language, which also states specifically that human cloning would be banned, has withstood legal challenges.

In a warm-up for a loud and expensive campaign battle, Catholic priests around the state have warned their parishioners not to sign the petitions, and television ads supporting the measure have aired.

Unlike previous ballot fights--on same-sex marriage, the right to carry a gun--this one will be layered in scientific complexity and wrapped in emotionally charged language.

"The whole country's going to be watching this," said St. Louis University political scientist Kenneth Warren.

McCaffrey, who played football at the Air Force Academy, said he is preparing for the day--maybe 10 or 15 years from now--when stem cell technology might enable him to walk again. He works out three days a week and receives electrical therapy to keep his leg muscles toned.

"I'm not sure that I'll ever be able to clock 4.6 [seconds] in the 40-yard dash, but what I can't accept is not starting," McCaffrey said. "There has to be a starting block for this. We have to try."