

[Print](#)

## Republican Split on Stem Cells Creates Political 'Wedge' Issue

March 22 (Bloomberg) -- In 2002, when he was an 18-year-old freshman at the U.S. Air Force Academy, Jeff McCaffrey was paralyzed from the waist down in a car accident. A Catholic and opponent of abortion, McCaffrey is now an ardent campaigner for research using stem cells from human embryos.

"I have no moral qualms," said McCaffrey. "It is simply cells," he said in a telephone interview. "Scientists can make those stem cells that are blank turn into spinal cells and heal my injury."

People such as McCaffrey present a quandary for Republicans, who are split over whether to allow federal funding for research on new stem cells from human embryos. Senate Democrats plan to force a debate on the issue in the coming months and use it in the campaign leading up to the November elections.

Republicans plan their own debate over bioethics in an effort to limit the damage from letting stem cells become "a wedge issue that divides Republicans," Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist said in an interview.

Republicans in the past often have benefited from such "wedge issues" -- subjects that divide Democrats' constituencies, such as gun control, abortion and gay marriage. Stem-cell research may be one of the first wedge issues that hurts Republicans more because of President George W. Bush's stand against it; polls show a majority of the public disagrees with him.

"Stem-cell research could define '06 Senate races," to the advantage of Democrats, said Phil Singer, a spokesman for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

### Bush's Ban

Bush has prohibited federal funding for any research using material from newly created human embryos since 2001. While Frist has promised to bring a measure before the Senate to overturn Bush's ban, a plan to begin debate this month has been stalled.

Scientists inject embryonic cells with genetic material, creating regenerative tissue that in theory could be implanted in patients to cure diseases from Parkinson's to juvenile diabetes. The Republican Party's evangelical Christian base is opposed to the research because human embryos are destroyed in the process.

"We have great qualms about the moral nature of this practice," said Carrie Gordon Earle, a bioethics analyst at Focus on the Family, a Christian advocacy group. The Colorado Springs, Colorado-based organization opposes the potential use of human embryos for research.

"You are destroying human entities," Earle said.

### Brownback's Effort

Kansas Republican Senator Sam Brownback is pushing for a week-long debate in the Senate on bioethics in which opponents of such stem-cell research can promote legislation to block it. Brownback said he thinks he has the 51 votes needed to pass such a measure.

"These are the ones you just have to state a truth and stand by it," he said. "It's human life. And I mean, that has to be stood up for."

Frist said his goal "is to be able to consider a range of bills and amendments" during any bioethics debate.

A number of Senate Republicans, including Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and Orrin Hatch of Utah, have joined forces with Democrats including Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Tom Harkin of Iowa to push the overturn of Bush's ban.

"Some Republicans are on the wrong side of the issue, obviously," Harkin said. "There may be some more that are just holding back, but when push comes to shove they will vote with us."

Patient groups such as the Parkinson's Action Network and the Coalition for Advancement of Medical Research, both based in Washington, recently began mobilizing members to push for a Senate vote.

## Basic Research

At issue in the debate is how much funding the U.S. puts into basic research into stem cells. Under Bush's 2007 budget, the National Institutes of Health would spend \$605 million on stem-cell research, of which almost 95 percent would go to work in adult stem cells and animal stem cells.

Only \$38 million would be directed to research using some of the 21 existing-stem cell lines available under Bush's 2001 executive order. Scientists say those lines have been corrupted by mouse cultures and are therefore useless for potential human therapies.

"As a result, very little research using human embryo cells is going on here in the U.S.," said William Neaves, director of the Stowers Institute for Medical Research in Kansas City, which was endowed with \$2 billion by Jim Stowers, founder of the American Century Cos. mutual funds.

### 'Falling Far Behind'

The U.S. is "at significant risk of falling far behind" other nations such as Great Britain, Israel and Singapore, Neaves said.

In a poll by the Gallup Organization conducted August 5-7, 56 percent of the 1,004 people surveyed supported research on newly created stem cells from human embryos. Even people who "take conservative positions on social issues, when they are faced with a choice between traditional values and advancement of medical research, generally opt for the latter," said Andrew Kohut, director of the Washington-based Pew Research Center.

Some states are taking action to fund research on their own. California passed a ballot measure to pump \$3 billion into stem-cell research over 10 years. Wisconsin, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts and Maryland have all passed laws supporting and funding embryonic stem-cell research.

In Missouri, a group funded by Stowers is pushing a ballot measure that would legalize research using stem cells from human embryos, Neaves said. Focus on the Family's Earle said Christian groups will use television, radio and mail in an effort to defeat the measure in November.

### Talent's Switch

Jim Talent, the Republican senator from the state who is running for re-election this year, last month abandoned his support for legislation that would ban embryonic stem-cell research, including cloning. He now backs research into producing stem cells without cloning or destroying human embryos.

McCaffrey has left the Air Force Academy and is now at the University of Missouri, where he's forming a student group to support stem-cell research.

"I want to use stem cells to save lives and better lives," he said. "I believe we have a moral obligation to find cures. It is the greater good."

To contact the reporter on this story:  
William Roberts in Washington at [wroberts@bloomberg.net](mailto:wroberts@bloomberg.net)

*Last Updated: March 22, 2006 00:16 EST*

 **Print**