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[Backers to push stem cell issue across country](#)

- [Carl T. Hall, Chronicle Science Writer](#)

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Chris Bell, a Democrat running a longshot campaign for governor of Texas, asserted divine support for turning stem cell research into a major wedge issue across the country.

"I believe God wants us to use science and technology to help our fellow man," Bell told a friendly crowd Sunday in Palo Alto.

He was preaching to a choir of stem cell research advocates gathered for a two-day conference at Stanford University that was partly a pep rally and partly a strategy session for reincarnating California's Proposition 71 across the country.

Organizers portray the effort to replicate that 2004 state initiative as a growing coalition. Prop. 71 authorized \$3 billion in taxpayer-backed grants for human embryonic stem cell research.

This controversial new field of biomedicine is starved for funds because of restrictions imposed by the Bush administration.

Advocates hope to extend their victory to other states, including some of the reddest of the red, while also gearing up for a potential head-on collision with President Bush's promised veto of pro-stem cell legislation pending in the Senate.

Battle lines are clearly being drawn already on Bush's home turf.

The campaign to re-elect Republican Gov. Rick Perry of Texas touts his "extensive record as a pro-life, pro-family conservative." Bell cites poll numbers showing broad support for stem cell science, even among conservatives.

Stem cell controversies in California have advanced to the nitty-gritty mechanics of ethical guidelines and governance of the state program. But that's not the case elsewhere -- and judging from some of the talk at Stanford, the pro-research side senses some opportunities.

Given the complexities of the issue -- and determined opposition from religious conservatives and abortion opponents, who view as immoral any research that requires destruction of the early-stage embryos that give rise to the stem cell colonies -- the research is not an easy sell. Still, proponents are urging a bolder stance, suggesting some elections may turn on attracting conservative votes with the hope of stem cell cures.

"This is one of the central issues in Wisconsin," said Hanson Kaye, communications director for Wisconsin's Democratic governor, Jim Doyle, a stem cell research advocate who delivered the keynote speech Saturday night at the "Stem Cell Policy and Advocacy Summit."

He is seeking re-election against a presumed Republican nominee, U.S. Rep. Mark Green of Green Bay, who argues against destruction of human embryos and maintains there's much more immediate promise in so-called adult stem cells.

"It is too bad that this has become partisan, but it has," Doyle said Sunday. "The repercussions are enormous. It is time for all of us to build consensus, to make our voices heard and to engage in the political fight over this research."



Green and other opponents of the controversial embryonic research weren't invited to the meeting at Stanford. But during interviews separately, they said they don't worry that stem cell fervor will sweep across the U.S. political landscape.

"Nobody really cares about this issue," said Dana Cody, executive director of the Life Legal Defense Foundation in Sacramento, a staunch critic of Prop. 71 involved in litigation that so far has blocked the California program's financing operations.

She blamed the 59 percent vote in favor of the stem cell initiative in 2004 on deceptive claims by the proponents and voter inattention.

"I don't think it's a big deal to most people -- and I think that's unfortunate," she said.

Many of her ideological opponents at the Stanford conference said much the same thing, even though several in the crowd also spoke movingly from wheelchairs about their own stake in the debate.

"This is a moral obligation we must fulfill," said Jeffrey McCaffrey, a former cadet at the U.S. Air Force Academy, who suffered a spinal cord injury four years ago and is now a student organizer of a pro-stem cell campaign in Missouri.

Still, advocates acknowledged their own failure to stir much excitement outside the ranks of patient advocates. Talk of organizing a "Million Patient March" on Washington, for instance, has sputtered because advocates aren't even sure they could muster 100,000 -- barely enough to tie up traffic around the Capitol Mall.

John Robertson, a law professor at the University of Texas, joined Paul Berg, a Stanford Nobel laureate, in proposing that advocates begin talking about stem cell research as a fundamental civil liberty, a matter of free inquiry and free speech for scientists, as well as a right of access to treatments for patients.

Robert Klein, chairman of the Prop. 71 agency and leader of the 2004 campaign, urged his allies to exploit some of the more extreme elements of proposed research bans that would penalize patients and family members who resort to certain stem cell based treatments.

"This is a violation of basic family rights," Klein said. "If you communicate that message effectively, your constituency is much bigger than you thought."

Stem cell research, Klein said, can become "a surrogate for science in a war between science and ideology." That's an argument his critics typically counter by pointing to their support of adult stem cell research, which doesn't rely on destroying any embryos, which have unique cells.

No one expects true believers on either side to change their minds soon. But Klein said research advocates have a lot of room to maneuver a bigger agenda, provided they adopt the same "sense of urgency" long evident among their foes.

One of the first big tests of that notion, outside a few battleground states like Missouri and Texas, may come soon enough if Congress enacts stem cell legislation in the face of a presidential veto threat. That could be the first veto of the Bush administration, provided Senate Republican leader Bill Frist of Tennessee allows a vote on the measure.

Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute, a Florida organization that sponsored the two-day conference, said a veto would "galvanize people like never before." If Bush does veto the bill, he predicted, the stem cell campaign that began in California could blossom into something akin to the 1970s consumer movement.

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