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A Special Project of the Genetics Policy Institute

Student Society for Stem Cell Research

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"It is very tempting to give up, yet we have to find the will to keep going. But even when we discover what motivates us, we realize that we can't go the distance alone." - Christopher Reeve

SSSCR in the News

Dartmouth hosts summit on stem cell research

By Alina Gonzalez
The Dartmouth
September 27, 2006

Over 75 students, professors and community members gathered in Dartmouth Medical School's Kellogg Auditorium Tuesday afternoon for an interdisciplinary summit on the controversial topic of stem cell research.

Focusing on the set of research titled, "The Convergence of Science, Ethics and Policy," the event featured three experts in the field -- Dr. John Gearhart, Ronald Green and Bernard Siegel -- who discussed the topic from scientific, ethical and policy-making standpoints.

Gearhart, a professor of comparative medicine, biochemistry and molecular biology at Johns Hopkins University, and a pioneer of stem cell research, spoke on behalf of the scientific community. Gearhart, who became the first scientist to isolate human embryonic stem cells in 1998, informed the crowd of the benefits and the risks involved with stem cell research.

"Embryonic stem cells have incredible potential," Gearhart said in reference to their "unlimited self-renewal and [their] rare capacity to form all of our 220 different cell types."

Gearhart, however, noted that the field still has many parameters that need to be negotiated as well as safety concerns that need to be addressed.

"You have to be able to prove that all of the cells you are putting into animals are doing everything you want them to do, and nothing harmful," Gearhart said about the possibility of injecting stem cells into humans for therapeutic or regenerative purposes.

"We have a ways to go and we have to be careful," he added.

Green, a religion professor and the director of Dartmouth's Ethics Institute, has testified twice in favor of stem cell research before a Senate sub-committee and also spoke at the panel. He addressed the ethical issues associated with stem cell research, most notably the controversy surrounding the destruction of embryos used in the process.

Green explained that since the traditional method for creating stem cell lines from embryos necessitates their destruction, most opposition to stem cell research comes from Christians and social conservatives who believe human life begins at conception.

"Those who oppose stem cell research believe in the sanctity of the embryo and believe you cannot do to an embryo what you would not do to your child, mother or roommate," Green told the crowd.

In the final segment of the panel, Siegel, the executive director of the nonprofit organization Genetics Policy Institute, presented a snapshot of what the stem cell research world is like for a policy-maker in support of the scientific field and explained why stem cell research is such a divisive and political topic.

"For the [millions of] Americans suffering from Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease, for their family members and caretakers, for the researchers who want federal grants and believe in the freedom of scientific research and for those religious groups who believe we are committing murder -- we all have a stake in this," Siegel said.

He pointed out that various Christian groups "fund a tremendous amount of money to social conservative bioethics think-tanks and have tremendous influence in Washington," and said he thinks they are determined to "dent *Roe v. Wade*."

"If they can get a law that says that an embryo is a person ... it would help derail *Roe v. Wade*," Siegel said.

Siegel's segment reached an emotional climax when he showed the crowd a video he had made with Christopher Reeves in which the paraplegic made a personal plea to the United Nations that its members not sign a universal treaty banning stem cell research.

"You all hold positions of enormous responsibility and are the collective moral voice of the world," Reeves told the U.N. representatives.

"Should the U.N. recommend a treaty that would prohibit this research," Reeves continued, "it might result in needless human suffering and might destroy the hope of millions of people." He implored the U.N. members

to make a decision "based on secular law and morally sound scientific knowledge."

The U.N. eventually voted against the proposed treaty.

Although Laura Myers '08, president of the Student Society for Stem Cell Research, planned the panel after she attended a stem cell conference at Stanford in June, developments in the stem cell research field since then have given the issue increased political and social relevance.

President George W. Bush vetoed H.R. 810, a bill that would have allowed for the federal funding of stem cell research, in July.

Scientists in Spain and England announced last Thursday that they were able to create stem cell lines from embryos that had stopped developing and were therefore functionally "dead." Many researchers hope that using these embryos might mitigate some ethical concerns about stem cell research. Other members of the scientific community, however, note that because embryos have not yet developed human organs like lungs and hearts, it remains difficult to determine for certain when an embryo is officially "dead."

Myers said that she hoped the panel would "raise awareness for stem cell research and educate the public about the science, ethics, and policy behind it, whether you're for, against or undecided on the issue."

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