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New Stem-Cell Bill Gains Support By Kristen Philipkoski

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A new bill proposing research into obtaining "morally acceptable" embryonic stem cells could give anti-abortion senators the out they've been hoping for.

Conservative senators like [Orrin Hatch](#) (R-Utah) and [Gordon Smith](#) (R-Oregon) have supported efforts to federally fund embryonic stem-cell research in the past, going against their anti-abortion brethren. But a bill introduced June 30 by [Rep. Roscoe Bartlett](#) (R-Maryland) would put \$15 million a year starting in 2006 toward developing scientific alternatives to destroying embryos.

The alternatives remain theories, however, and have not yet been shown to work. Embryonic stem-cell research advocates say pursuing the proposals could divert money and efforts away from research that already has shown promise for treating spinal cord injury, diabetes, Parkinson's disease and other ailments.

"This should not be a political safety (net) for anyone," said Bernard Siegel, president of the [Genetics Policy Institute](#), a group that supports embryonic stem-cell research. "This research is too important to patients. So many people are suffering. To think that resources could be diverted to these ideas and theories rather than the science going on in the lab right now would be truly catastrophic."

Bartlett's bill, [HR3144](#), would grant funding to researchers pursuing methods for deriving pluripotent (meaning they can become almost every cell in the human body) cells without destroying human embryos. The [President's Council on Bioethics](#) laid out several options in a [white paper](#) in May.

Bioethicists and scientists testified Tuesday regarding the theories outlined in the white paper before the Senate [Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies](#). Arlen Specter, (R-Pennsylvania), who is suffering from cancer and authored a competing bill, chairs the subcommittee.

Specter's voice was rough from chemotherapy treatments. He said he is angry that stem-cell research is still being delayed by lack of funding.

"I've been waiting too long already," Specter said.

Specter has introduced a bill that would overthrow President Bush's [executive order](#), which limits federal funding to a small number of human embryonic stem-cell lines. Specter's bill would open up funding to unused embryos donated by couples after in vitro fertilization. The House has already passed the bill, and the Senate was expected to do the same.

But the president has promised to veto it. And now, the bill faces another challenge from Bartlett's new bill. *The Washington Post* reported that several senators, including Hatch, Johnny Isakson (R-Georgia) and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas), have hinted that they might transfer their vote

to Bartlett's bill.

Dr. Robert Lanza, vice president of medical and scientific development at [Advanced Cell Technology](#), testified regarding one of the techniques that could qualify for funding under the new bill. The method is similar to pre-implantation genetic diagnosis -- it would involve removing one or two cells from an eight-cell embryo, deriving embryonic stem cells from the extracted cells and leaving the remaining embryo unharmed.

It's not proven, however, that the procedure won't harm the embryo.

While Lanza said the technique is worthy of further investigation, he said he doesn't believe it's a replacement for studying embryos. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), who co-chaired the subcommittee meeting, asked what research Lanza thought was best to pursue.

"That's a no-brainer," Lanza said. "Removing the current limitations. But we'll take any additional money you'll throw our way."

[William Hurlbut](#), a bioethicist at Stanford University and member of the President's Council on Bioethics, testified regarding a method that would use cloning technology, or somatic cell nuclear transfer, to create an entity using an egg and genetically altered human tissue. This "altered nuclear transfer" would not create a human life, he said, but could produce embryonic stem cells.

But some critics are troubled by the method, calling it a "Frankensteinian" scheme to create a disabled embryo.

"I have grave reservations about ANT," said Dr. Ronald Green, director of the Ethics Institute at Dartmouth University, during the hearing. "I believe it can be properly characterized as deliberately creating and destroying an impaired form of human life."

Green also said he believes it's a slippery slope toward using "impaired humans" as donors.

George Daley, a Harvard University stem-cell researcher who also testified, said the only alternative method he advocates is "dedifferentiation," which means reverting a mature cell back to its embryonic stage.

All of those who testified said they believe treatments would come faster if embryonic stem-cell research was allowed to proceed unencumbered and with federal funding.

"While you were listening to this testimony, another 10 Americans have died of diseases that could potentially be treated using stem cells in the future," Lanza said. "It would be tragic not to pursue all the options and methods available to us to get this technology to the bedside as soon as possible."



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