

Author: amniotic cell study not a substitute

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WASHINGTON — The author of a study on amniotic stem cells urged Congress today not to consider his work a substitute for the search for disease-fighting material from embryonic stem cells.

"Some may be interpreting my research as a substitute for the need to pursue other forms of regenerative medicine therapies, such as those involving embryonic stem cells. I disagree with that assertion," wrote Anthony Atala of Wake Forest University, the author of a study published this week and widely seized upon by opponents of embryonic stem cell research as a more moral option.

Atala and other researchers reported Sunday that the stem cells they drew from amniotic fluid donated by pregnant women hold much the same promise as embryonic stem cells.

In a letter to sponsors of legislation up for a House vote Thursday, Atala wrote that it was "essential that National Institutes of Health-funded researchers are able to fully pursue embryonic stem cell research as a complement to research into other forms of stem cells."

The bill, which would clear the way for federally funded embryonic research, is expected to pass but without the required majority required to override Bush's expected veto. Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa said he expects same bill to reach that veto-proof threshold when it comes up in his chamber in a few weeks.

Atala's study and the letter add a dose of drama to round two of Congress' battle with President Bush over whether taxpayers should fund embryonic stem cell research. Bush and a minority of Americans say they believe the research is immoral because the process of culling the stem cells kills the embryo.

Opponents of the legislation, which Bush vetoed last year, say Atala's study bolsters their argument that science need not advance at the expense of budding human life.

Scientists hope that someday stem cells may be used against diseases such as for Lou Gehrig's, diabetes, Alzheimer's and cancer.

Polls show Americans overwhelmingly support federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.