

'100 hours': House passes stem-cell bill despite veto threat

- **NEW:** House passes bill lifting ban on stem-cell research 253-174
- Bush vows to veto legislation for second time
- Scientists say stem cells may be used to grow replacement tissue
- Destruction of embryos during research prompts opposition

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Democratic-controlled House Thursday passed a bill bolstering embryonic stem cell research that advocates say shows promise for numerous medical cures.

But the 253-174 vote fell short of the two-thirds margin required to overturn President Bush's promised veto, despite gains made by supporters in the November elections. Bush vetoed identical legislation last year and the White House on Thursday promised he would veto it again.

The White House said the bill -- the third bill of the Democrats' first 100 hours agenda to pass the House -- "would use federal taxpayer dollars to support and encourage the destruction of human life for research."

At stake was whether research on cells taken from human embryos -- considered by scientists to be the most promising approach to developing potential treatments or cures for dozens of diseases -- should be underwritten with taxpayer funds.

The debate raises passions because the research typically involves the destruction of frozen embryos created for in vitro fertilization. It draws fierce opposition from anti-abortion lawmakers and like-minded constituents who believe their taxes should not fund such research. Proponents of the research said it is done on embryos that would otherwise be discarded from fertility clinics anyway.

Despite bolstering their numbers in November's elections, supporters of the controversial research -- which holds promise for medical cures of diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's -- acknowledge they lack the two-thirds margin to override another Bush veto.

The House commenced debate on the bill, the third piece of the Democrats' first 100 hours agenda, Thursday morning. Just hours before, however, the White House restated Bush's veto threat. The statement said the bill "would use federal taxpayer dollars to support and encourage the destruction of human life for research." (Interactive: [House Democrat's '100 hour' agenda](#))

At stake was whether research on cells taken from human embryos -- considered by scientists to be the most promising approach to developing potential treatments or cures for dozens of diseases -- should be underwritten with taxpayer funds.

Bill sparks passions

The debate raises passions since the research typically involves the destruction of frozen embryos created for in vitro fertilization, which ensures fierce opposition from anti-abortion lawmakers and like-minded constituents who believe their taxes should not fund such research. Proponents of the research said it is done on embryos that would otherwise be discarded from fertility clinics anyway.

The debate came just days after new research reported that stem cells extracted harmlessly from the amniotic fluid that cushions a fetus in-utero hold much the same promise for disease-fighting as embryonic stem cells. ([Full story](#))

"I support stem cell research with only one exception -- research that requires killing human life," said Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio. "Taxpayer-funded stem cell research must be carried out in an ethical manner in a way that respects the sanctity of human life. Fortunately, ethical stem cell alternatives continue to flourish in the scientific

community." ([Watch how new discoveries may change the stem-cell debate](#) )

Democrats countered with Rep. James Langevin, D-Rhode Island, an anti-abortion lawmaker who is paralyzed from the chest down from a handgun accident that occurred when he was a teenager. The research, Langevin said, offers "tremendous hope that not only stem cell research might lead one day to a cure for spinal cord injuries but one day a child with diabetes will no longer have to endure a lifetime of painful shots and tests."

Dr. Robert Lanza, a top stem cell researcher at Advanced Cell Technology, Inc., said that stem cell-based treatments could be just a few years away for eye and spinal cord injuries, but that a decade or more of research is needed before treatments might become available for diseases such as Alzheimer's and diabetes.

Polls: Most support research

Polls show most Americans support embryonic stem cell research, and Democrats say the issue played a big role in the November 7 elections that returned their party to the majority in the House and Senate.

But in the House, Democratic gains of 30 seats don't translate into anywhere near that number of new votes for the embryonic stem cell research bill, sponsored by Reps. Diana DeGette, D-Colorado, and Mike Castle, R-Del.

For starters, many Democratic freshmen defeated more moderate Republicans who voted for the bill when it originally passed in 2005 and on an unsuccessful veto override attempt last year. And some Republicans who supported the bill have been replaced with opponents of the measure.

As a result, said Douglas Johnson, legislative director of the National Right to Life Committee, House embryonic stem cell research proponents have gained only about a dozen votes.

If every House member votes, it takes 290 votes to override a veto. Support reached a high-water mark of 238 in the prior GOP-controlled House.

"It will be difficult to get to 290 votes, but we're gaining on it," DeGette said.

Both the House and Senate have to override a veto for a bill to become law without a president's signature.

A host of potential cures

Scientists still say, however, that embryonic stem cells so far are backed by the most promising evidence that one day they might be used to grow replacements for damaged tissue, such as new insulin-producing cells for diabetics or new nerve connections to restore movement after spinal injury.

The legislation would lift Bush's 2001 ban on federal dollars spent on deriving new stem cells from fertilized embryos. Bush's veto of the bill last year was the first veto of his presidency.

Embryonic stem cells are able to morph into any of the more than 220 cell types that make up the human body. They usually are culled from fertility-clinic leftovers otherwise destined to be thrown away. But because the culling kills the embryos, Bush on August 9, 2001, restricted government funding to research using only the embryonic stem cell lines then in existence, groups of stem cells kept alive and propagating in lab dishes.

But those 21 stem cell lines have many problems, and researchers say 300 newer lines, culled from fertility clinic leftovers otherwise destined to be thrown away, are considered better suited for implantation into sick Americans.

Scientists take those cells from a 5-day-old embryo, when it's a ball of about 100 cells no bigger than the period at the end of this sentence.

Copyright 2007 The [Associated Press](#).