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Research dividing states

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President Bush, accompanied by the McNamara family of Middletown, Conn., from second from left, spina bifida patient Kaitlyne, her parents Mike and Tracy, and brother Ian, discusses stem-cell research on Wednesday at the White House.

WASHINGTON — University of Michigan stem cell scientist Sean Morrison recently got a telephone call from a woman offering to donate her leftover embryos from a fertilization procedure for his studies on Parkinson's disease.

What she didn't know was that Michigan law prohibits research on human embryos. Morrison suggested that the woman contact a lab in another state.

In Illinois, Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich is promoting embryonic stem-cell research in an effort to lure scientists and investors, in some cases from neighboring states. In 2005, Blagojevich sent a letter urging Missouri's top scientists to move to Illinois rather than work under a cloud created by Missouri legislators' ultimately unsuccessful efforts to ban research on human embryos.

"The lack of federal leadership leaves a vacuum that states are trying to fill on a very piecemeal basis," said Michigan state Rep. Andy Meisner, a Democrat.

He is trying for the third consecutive year to amend 1978 and 1998 Michigan statutes so that the nascent research can go forward in the job-hungry state's acclaimed medical research institutions.

Some religious leaders and social conservatives see things differently. Instead of seeking cures for chronic and debilitating diseases by pursuing research that destroys human embryos, they maintain scientists should conduct equally promising research such as non-controversial adult stem-cell studies.

Lending currency to their arguments, a medical journal recently reported that mouse skin cells had been coaxed into behaving like embryonic stem cells and human skin cells may have the same potential.

But scientists argue adult stem cell research and other alternatives are no substitute for embryonic studies. They are eager to experiment with human embryonic stem cells because the undifferentiated cells have the capacity to develop into any organ tissue in the body, a trait called pluripotent.

"This fixation on embryo destruction as the necessary path to medical progress has in fact slowed progress," said Richard Doerflinger of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

States' diverging positions

President Bush's decision Wednesday to again veto legislation that would allow federal funding of embryonic stem cell research puts the issue squarely in states' hands.

"Destroying human life in the hopes of saving human life is not ethical. And it is not the only option before us. We're already seeing remarkable advances in science and therapeutic uses of stem cells drawn from adults and children and the blood from umbilical cords with no harm to the donor," Bush said.

In response to Bush's 2001 decision to curtail federal funding of stem-cell research and his first veto in July 2006 of a bill that would permit federal funding of the studies, states have taken widely diverging positions on the issue.

Seven states — California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Wisconsin — are providing seed money for the fledgling science, and Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick, a Democrat, in May called on lawmakers in his state to follow suit.

Six other states — Arkansas, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, North Dakota and South Dakota — ban the research. Three states — Iowa, Massachusetts and Missouri — have affirmed its legality but do not offer funding.

In Florida and Texas, lawmakers are deadlocked on the issue. Most states have steered clear of it altogether.

"Politicians don't want to enter this quagmire of ethics and science if they don't have to," said Patrick Kelly of the Biotechnology Industry Association. "There's no real middle ground —no compromise to be had."

Research or abortion?

For millions of patients and their advocates, embryonic stem-cell research offers the hope of cures for debilitating and deadly diseases such as juvenile diabetes, spinal cord injuries and Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases. For scientists, it is a path to discovering the basic workings of human cells and the causes and therapies for a host of human maladies.

But for some religious leaders and social conservatives, who liken the research to abortion, the studies violate the sanctity of human life. They argue time is on their side because as scientists discover alternative methods of harvesting pluripotent cells, the destruction of embryos no longer will be necessary.

Scientists who favor embryonic stem cell research — including the Bush administration's Dr. Elias A. Zerhouni, who heads the National Institutes of Health (NIH) — say time is running out. Unless the federal government invests in the research, the United States is in danger of falling behind other countries in this cutting-edge field, Zerhouni said at a congressional hearing this year.

Supporters of the science welcome state funding but say the balkanized approach will create hurdles to scientific progress and that only the NIH is equipped to evaluate which projects merit funding and foster the scientific collaboration necessary to advance the science. "Creating mini-NIH's at the state level is, at best, a temporary solution," said Daniel Perry, Executive Director of the Alliance for Aging Research.

Voters have their say

Recent national polls indicate a majority of the American public favors federal support of embryonic stem cell research and in last year's elections both Democratic and Republican political candidates consistently beat back their anti-stem cell competitors. In Maryland, both gubernatorial candidates — incumbent Gov. Robert Ehrlich, a Republican, and current Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat — supported state funding of the science.

Indeed, the issue was pivotal in a U.S. Senate race in 2006 that saw Democrat Claire McCaskill oust the Republican incumbent, Jim Talent. McCaskill backed amending the state constitution to allow the research; Talent opposed the move. Most Democrats in Congress and state capitals are united in support of embryonic stem cell research, but the issue has split Republicans. Many oppose any research that involves embryos. But others, including high-profile Republicans such as Nancy Reagan with loved ones who have suffered from debilitating diseases, are vocal supporters.