

New York State to Fund Stem Cell Research

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New York State has finally entered the stem cell arena with the intention of becoming a big-time player second only to California. The state will put \$100 million into the research in fiscal year 2008, and stem cell supporters expect the number ultimately to reach \$1 billion over a decade.

On the night of 31 March, minutes before the beginning of the state's 2008 fiscal year, legislators passed a budget that includes \$100 million for stem cell research. The money will be administered by a new entity set up within the state health department. In addition, for the next 10 years, the state will provide up to \$50 million annually for stem cell research from a fund created from the sale of state-run insurance plans to private entities. In addition to this, according to Robin Elliott, head of the Parkinson's Disease Foundation in New York, and member of the coalition New Yorkers for the Advancement of Medical Research, stem cell supporters are optimistic that the legislature will appropriate an additional \$50 million a year.

State legislators have been trying for years to set up a stem cell initiative. They were able to pull it off this year thanks to the support of a new Democratic governor, Eliot Spitzer. Elected last year, Spitzer initially wanted a California-style bond issue to raise \$1 billion for stem cell research in New York.

The newly passed measure outlaws reproductive cloning but makes no mention of research cloning--otherwise known as somatic cell nuclear transfer. Elliott says the measure is couched in the vaguest possible terms in order to avoid kicking up resistance from opponents of human embryonic stem cell research. The words "human" and "embryonic" do not appear in the text, which also does not mention federal policies that prohibit federally funded researchers from doing research with human embryonic cell lines created since 2001.

Researchers are "deeply grateful" that New York has taken the stem cell plunge, says Kenneth Davis, president of New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center. The law calls for the establishment of a 13-member Empire State Stem Cell Board to be appointed by the governor, which will administer the new Empire State Stem Cell Fund for research in the state. It's good to have it "right in the heart of the bureaucracy," says Elliott--in part because it will not be vulnerable to lawsuits as in the case of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine. Elliott says the board will set up panels of outside scientists--most likely not from New York--to review the grants.

