

Second time around

Ryan Dinkgrave

From both sides of the political aisle, and from all across the country, people are speaking out with urgency in support of embryonic stem cell research.

Last week, the National Institutes of Health's director, Elias Zerhouni, testified before a Senate appropriations subcommittee, where he was asked if scientists would have a greater opportunity to develop new treatments and cure chronic diseases if President Bush's harsh funding restrictions were lifted. Zerhouni was clear in his response: Yes. "It's not possible for me to see how we can continue the momentum of science and research with the stem cell lines that we have at NIH that can be funded," said Zerhouni. He continued, "From my standpoint, it is clear today that American science will be better served, and the nation would be better served, if we let our scientists have access to more cell lines."

Here in Michigan, a MIRS/Rossman Group survey conducted last month showed 65 percent of Michigan voters would support a ballot proposal to permit stem cell research. Currently, Michigan has some of the most restrictive and backward laws on such research in the nation, despite the state's expressed desire to be a leader in medical research, biotechnology and related fields.

A mere 23 percent of voters said they would vote against such a proposal, and 11 percent were unsure how they would vote. In places such as Macomb and Oakland counties and the Upper Peninsula, more than 70 percent of voters supported the proposal. Kelly Rossman-McKinney, president and CEO of the Rossman Group, said, "This was a major platform of the governor's State of the State address, and the data shows that if an election were held today, stem cell research would pass by a huge margin."

Some who oppose embryonic stem cell research have done so under the guise of suggesting that other methods are of equal scientific value. These individuals point to alternate and unproved forms of stem cell research, such as that on adult or amniotic stem cells, and claim these methods hold equal promise as embryonic stem cell research. This is simply not the case, however, a point echoed by Zerhouni, who said that such claims "do not hold scientific water" and that "it is important for us not to fight with one hand tied behind our back."

A Washington Post editorial last week made the point very clear. Titled "Untie the hand," the column called for Bush to realize that "a huge majority of Americans, Congress and even Mr. Bush's NIH director have considered the implications of funding embryonic

stem cell research and concluded that extracting the cells from embryos set to be discarded anyway is not objectionable enough to deny funds."

The Senate is expected to vote in the coming weeks on a bill identical to that which passed both houses before Bush vetoed it last summer. The bill, which aims to expand federal funding for and lift harsh restrictions on embryonic stem cell research, was passed by the House with a vote of 253-174 earlier this year and has received very strong bipartisan support.

Although there were not sufficient votes in Congress to override the veto in 2006, this is a greater possibility this year, as Americans expressed their support for embryonic stem cell research in the 2006 Congressional elections.

So the question remains: With the American people so persistent and unrelenting in their support for this urgently needed medical research, will the president listen or will he continue to defy the will of the people and the rights of millions to find cures for their illnesses?

I, for one, get sick at the thought of the president telling millions of Americans that he is putting his backward, unpopular and heartless beliefs before their health, their cures and their hope for a better life.

What might it take for the president to reverse his position? Must the younger Barbara be diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes and have to inject insulin daily? Must the elder Bush's motor skills and speech be degenerated by Parkinson's disease? How loud must we scream?

With the enormous support for research, it seems unconscionable that the president would again veto this legislation, but if he does, he can be sure we will continue to fight twice as hard and scream twice as loud.

Please visit the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research (www.camradvocacy.org) and Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures (www.stemcellresearchformichigan.com) to learn more about how you can help.

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