

Senate OKs funding for work with stem cells

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ST. PAUL - A bill allowing the University of Minnesota to use state tax dollars for all types of stem-cell research won state Senate support Wednesday after a lengthy debate over medical ethics.

The 36-26 vote leaves the Senate short of the two-thirds majority needed to override a possible veto by Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who has called for stricter limits on experiments using human embryos.

"Our hope is they would be willing to work this out without getting to a stalemate," Pawlenty said Wednesday.

One more round of Senate voting is required, but the outcome isn't expected to change.

Rep. Phyllis Kahn, DFL-Minneapolis, said a vote on her companion House bill should come within the next two weeks.

Supporters spoke of potential scientific breakthroughs from unhindered research and said a state policy would ensure proper oversight.

"Absent the ability to use the full gamut of stem cells that are available, the research doesn't work," said Sen. Dick Cohen, DFL-St. Paul and the bill's sponsor.

Other side

But opponents were equally insistent that research using cells derived from embryos is unproven and oversteps moral boundaries because the embryos typically get destroyed in the process.

They argue it boils down to trading one life for another.

"Not everything should be sacrificed on the altar of research," said Sen. David Hann, R-Eden Prairie.

Hann and other Republican lawmakers expressed concern that the bill gives scientists license to harvest and grow embryos for the sole purpose of mining them.

They said the focus should remain on cellular research occurring on adult stem cells and those drawn from discarded umbilical cords.

Scientists are studying how to turn stem cells into virtual repair kits for damaged organs or provide cures for debilitating diseases such as multiple sclerosis.

Some scientists tout embryonic cells, which are created in the first days after conception, because they can be shaped into any of the more than 220 cell types that make up the human body.

"I think of the families that view this as their only hope," said Sen. Ann Lynch, DFL-Rochester.

Restrictions on federal dollars for embryonic-cell research have been in place for several years. Private dollars have filled gaps, and states are ramping up their involvement as well.

Research

Cohen said the University of Minnesota, a pioneer in cell studies, risks becoming "a backwater research university" if the state doesn't help it keep up with other public institutions.

In Washington, Congress is debating whether to lift federal funding restrictions on embryonic research, although President Bush has drawn a narrow line on what he'll support.

The bill before Minnesota legislators doesn't explicitly grant the university any money for now. It would open the way for future use of taxpayer dollars.

An attempt to bar state money from research involving embryonic stem cells failed. But by a unanimous vote, senators moved to prohibit the experiments from venturing into human cloning.