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Working for a cure

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When it comes to deciding whether to fund medical research, that scientists expect will improve and save millions of lives, how can a president be so out of touch with the country's citizens? Of only three vetoes during his presidency, all within the past year, George W. Bush has cast two against embryonic stem cell research, further delaying a biological cure to diabetes and other diseases.

Meanwhile, 150 children with Type 1 diabetes from across the U.S. and six nations convened in Washington this week to show their support for diabetes research, and to encourage their legislators to support federal funding for the research that will lead to new treatments and a cure for their disease.

The contrast between the president's decision and the children's emotional and inspired advocacy for their cause, clearly illustrated the great divide between the president and the people.

The theme of their summit is "Promise to Remember Me." The children, who ranged in age from 4-17 years old, asked the men and women of Congress to remember their names, faces and the stories of their struggles when faced with decisions of whether or not to fund critical research that seeks to improve treatments for, and cure, diabetes.

The children delegates to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation's fifth annual Children's Congress were empowered by other Type 1 diabetics who were used to being the stars of the show but this time were the cheerleaders for the delegates. Among the celebrities encouraging the brave delegates and participating in a panel discussion about diabetes and athletics, were NBA star Adam Morrison, LPGA golfer Michelle McGann, NFL offensive lineman Kendall Simmons and NASCAR driver Dexter Bean. In talking about how diabetes affects their lives and how they must work hard to care for themselves, the athletes encouraged the delegates to tell their own stories to the lawmakers.

These young advocates heard the message loud and clear, and were truly impressive in their efforts to actively support their cause. Yet despite the enthusiasm, courage and dedication of the delegates and their families on the final day of the summit in Washington, President Bush vetoed the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act for a second time.

Even with overwhelming public and bipartisan political support for such research, the president has again sent a clear message to diabetics and the millions of Americans who could benefit from such research: Your lives are not as important as those of frozen cells that are set to be discarded from a clinic.

A recent three-minute video by Hollywood director Jerry Zucker, being distributed across the Internet, illustrates the point quite well. In the fictitious dialogue, clinical researchers want to use stem cells for research, but are told by the president that it is unethical. In the end, despite being told of the many benefits and medical advancements that could come of such research, Bush tells the researchers "No," and throws the cells in the trash. The clip concludes with a clinic employee carrying a garbage bag, supposedly containing the microscopic cells, to a dumpster.

Despite the frustrating state of policy regarding stem cell research in this country, as well as this state, progress is being made in several ways.

The young delegates in Washington were encouraging their members of Congress to reauthorize the Special Diabetes Program that funds important research on prevention and a cure for Type 1 diabetes through the National Institutes of Health.

In Michigan, a state with some of the nation's most restrictive laws about stem cell research, efforts are underway to enact legislation to give the state an opportunity to grow in important and growing biomedical research fields. Meanwhile, some in the U.S. Congress are trying to advance embryonic stem cell research legislation through other means, such as an addition to the must-pass appropriations bills.

While working hard to support a cure for diabetes, the 150 children, like millions of Americans and people around the world, wait. We wait for the nation to elect a president who supports stem cell research, we wait for the government to fully allow researchers to conduct this research, but most of all, we wait for a life without diabetes and other diseases that could be cured. Unfortunately, that first objective will not be achieved until November 2008. The date when curing these diseases is reached, on the other hand, is not so clear. How can we afford to waste any time?