

Latest Update - September 24, 2002

Davis OKs stem cell research
California is first state to encourage studies

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Mark Martin, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau

Sacramento -- Challenging the Bush administration on one of the hottest controversies in medicine, Gov. Gray Davis on Sunday signed legislation intended to make California a haven for stem cell research.

The law makes California the first state in the nation to give its stamp of approval to research that scientists say could lead to breakthroughs in treating disorders ranging from Alzheimer's disease to spinal cord injuries.

Stem cells, which are small fragments of living tissue, can be turned into almost any variety of cell. Researchers hope they can find ways to transplant new cells into patients who have lost cells due to disease or injuries.

The new law, written by state Sen. Deborah Ortiz, D-Sacramento, establishes a broad regulatory framework for stem cell research requiring that projects be reviewed by an approved industry review board. The bill does not spell out which panel would have oversight responsibilities or provide guidelines for research project approval.

Also under the new law, fertility clinics would be required to tell patients how they can donate unused embryos to science. The measure requires written consent for donating embryos and prohibits the sale of embryos.

The law contrasts with policies enacted last year by President Bush, who sharply limited federally funded stem cell research.

While those limits are still in place, California can now shift state research funds administered through the University of California to new research projects and spark more private funding.

"You'd probably want to donate in a state where it's legal," said David Gollaher, CEO of California Healthcare Institute, a consortium of 215 universities and biomedicine companies involved in stem cell research.

Davis and research proponents said Sunday that California would become the worldwide leader in cutting-edge biomedical research that has been stifled by a national ethical debate.

"With world-class universities, top-flight researchers and a thriving biomedical industry, California is perfectly positioned to be a world leader in this area," Davis said.

RESEARCH OPPOSITION

Many conservative groups and the Catholic Church oppose the research because it begins with the destruction of a human embryo.

"Ethically, to use what we consider human beings for research -- even if it's of possible benefit to other people -- is not moral," said George Wesolek, director of public policy and social concerns for the Archdiocese of San Francisco. "Both scientists and ethicists are not sure about where this research is going, and it would be prudent to wait, until we know more, before signing such an all-encompassing bill into law."

Wesolek called the legislation a "risky venture" that is backed by companies doing stem cell research. "A lot of this is being fueled by economics. There are huge dollars in this," he said. "Those companies are really pushing this bill because they think it might be to their advantage economically."

Others said the new law will foster important research.

"The legislation will attract the best and brightest of the world's scientists to California," said Larry Goldstein, a professor at the University of California at San Diego who uses stem cells in his research on neurological disorders.

Since the idea was first discussed in 1998, it has met with fierce resistance from some who suggest it could lead to cloning.

Nonetheless, Davis, who noted that his mother-in-law suffered from Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, said California scientists needed to move on with research as the ethical debate continues.

CONGRESSIONAL IN ACTION

California's action on the controversial research comes during a period of federal inaction.

Congress has been unable to muster support for two disparate bills on the topic. One, by Republican Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas, would criminalize aspects of stem cell research. An opposing measure would do on a federal level what Davis enacted in California.

Neither bill has a consensus, and it appears unlikely that Congress will act on either bill this year.

"It's very possible California may have the only law for some time," noted Gollaher.

Actor Christopher Reeve, who has become a stem-cell research activist since a horse-riding accident left him paralyzed, said the new law could spark research that has been limited by the political controversy surrounding the issue.

"Since human embryos were first isolated in 1998, political discourse has had a chilling effect on our scientists," Reeve noted.

In a conference call with reporters, he said he hoped the new state law would pave the way for the return of a prominent stem-cell researcher who left San Francisco for England last year after the Bush decision. Roger Pedersen was a leading researcher for UCSF before he left the country.

Davis signed another bill Sunday that makes permanent a temporary ban on human cloning for reproductive purposes. That ban was set to expire at the end of the year.

E-mail Mark Martin at markmartin@sfchronicle.com.

Update from July 16, 2002
Update from May 26, 2002
Update from May 07, 2002
Update from April 23, 2002
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