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House votes to expand stem cell research

By Jill Zuckman

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(MCT)

WASHINGTON - Following an emotional day of debate in which lawmakers invoked their own medical tragedies and those of families, friends and constituents, the House voted Thursday to expand federally funded embryonic stem cell research.

The vote was 253-174, far short of what is necessary to override a promised presidential veto. But the third major piece of legislation to pass the House this week fulfilled a key campaign promise Democrats made on their path to winning the majority.

The measure is expected to pass the Senate and then, in a replay of last year, it is expected to provoke what would be just the second veto of President Bush's tenure. The bill "would use federal taxpayer dollars to support and encourage the destruction of human life for research," the White House said in a statement.

Thirty-seven Republicans joined 216 Democrats to pass the legislation, which would undo restrictions on the research put in place by the president in 2001.

Most scientists believe embryonic stem cells are capable of forming all of the different tissue types found in the human body, which could lead to the treatment of an array of serious ailments, from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases to juvenile diabetes, cancer and spinal cord injuries.

But critics decry the destruction of human embryos that takes place in the course of that research, and say there is

another way to find cures through adult stem cell research, blood cord research and now research into stem cells found in amniotic fluid and placentas.

"I support stem cell research with only one exception - research that requires killing human life," said House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio. "Taxpayer-funded stem cell research must be carried out in an ethical manner in a way that respects the sanctity of human life. Fortunately ethical stem cell alternatives continue to flourish."

Advocates countered with stories of illness and accident, describing the hope they have that embryonic stem cell research could one day yield an answer to their pain.

"When I was injured in an accidental shooting almost 26 years ago, I was told I would never walk again," said Rep. Jim Langevin, D-R.I., speaking from his wheelchair. "I always held out hope that someday that would change. Through the miracles of science and prayer, there would be a cure for spinal cord injuries. It is only today that that promise for a cure has become truly real."

Rep. Phil Hare, D-Ill., described his vote for embryonic stem cell research as "bittersweet" as he took the seat of his mentor, former Rep. Lane Evans, D-Ill., who retired after his Parkinson's disease became too severe to allow him to work.

"I know he is proud that I'm going to cast one of my very first votes as a member of Congress to expand embryonic stem cell research," Hare said.

But opponents had stories of their own to tell.

Rep. Daniel Lipinski, D-Ill., told his colleagues that he suffers from juvenile diabetes, a disease that can lead to amputation, blindness, kidney disease and other debilitating side effects. He gives himself four injections of insulin every day.

"I want a cure for diabetes and for other diseases that are far more devastating, but I don't believe this bill is the way to get there," he said.

Lipinski was just one of a host of lawmakers opposed to the destruction of embryos that occurs as part of the research. But others pointed out that under current law, that research is legal and is taking place throughout the nation.

"This debate is not about whether we should allow the destruction of human embryos, this debate is about who should pay for it," said Rep. Mike Pence, R-Ind..

In 2001, Bush prohibited federally funded research using embryonic stem cell lines derived after Aug. 9 of that year. Scientists have complained that only 22 of the cell lines are available for use and that they are of limited genetic diversity.

Thursday's debate showcased many of the new Democrats elected to Congress, many of whom campaigned last year for overturning Bush's policy.

"A lot of candidates, including myself, used this issue as a staple of their campaigns," said Rep. Jason Altmire, D-Pa., who opposes abortion but supports embryonic stem cell research. Altmire said he saw the promise of the research firsthand when he worked as acting vice president for government relations and community health services at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

And he argued that embryos used in research would have been destroyed anyway by fertility clinics unable to use them.

"Federal restrictions don't protect a single embryo from destruction, they only delay medical research," Altmire said.

House Republicans, however, are pushing to increase federal funding for new research in stem cells derived from amniotic fluid as a way of quelling interest in embryonic stem cell research.

Conservative groups quickly condemned Thursday's House vote.

"Allowing unethical research that kills small human beings is apparently not enough for some," said Wendy Wright, president of Concerned Women of America. "They insist that all Americans must be complicit by paying for it, even though superior alternatives - which are ethical and effective - not only exist but are already treating patients. Since ethical alternatives exist, this bill is about playing politics, not helping patients."

Advocates for the embryonic stem cell research say they support all forms of medical research, whether it uses cells from placentas, amniotic fluid, adult stem cells or anything else.

"Christopher Reeve always said to me that there are hundreds and thousands of paths that you could take for research, why would you want to block just one of them," said Kathy Lewis, president of the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation.