

## (July 30, 2007) Stem-cell research still a hot topic in U.S. Congress, states

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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- As the U.S. Senate considers whether to try to override the presidential veto of a bill permitting federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research, a new bill in the House of Representatives would promote stem-cell research and clinical trials that do not involve the destruction of human embryos.

The Patients First Act, introduced by Republican Rep. J. Randy Forbes of Virginia and Democratic Rep. Dan Lipinski of Illinois, is supported by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, according to Richard M. Doerflinger, deputy director of the USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, because "it will promote stem-cell research that is helping patients now in clinical trials, or showing real benefits in animal trials."

"The hype and public debate over embryonic stem cells has unfortunately diverted attention away from medical research that is already working, using stem cells that pose no moral problem," he added.

Meanwhile, the topic of stem cells also is making news in the states, as New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine signed legislation July 26 that will ask voters in November to approve spending \$450 million over 10 years for embryonic stem-cell research.

And in Missouri, where voters amended the state constitution last November to protect stem-cell research that destroys embryos, legislators have refused to approve funding for new stem-cell projects and there has been talk of repealing the controversial amendment.

Doerflinger said a vote in the Senate on the Stem-Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2007, vetoed by President George W. Bush June 20, was unlikely before Congress' August recess. Neither house passed the legislation with the two-thirds majority needed to override a veto.

At a Capitol Hill news conference July 26, three patients who have benefited from treatments using adult or umbilical-cord-blood stem cells and two physicians who have performed such treatments spoke in favor of the Patients First Act.

The legislation would "promote research and human clinical trials using stem cells that are ethically obtained and show evidence of providing clinical benefit for human patients" and would direct the secretary of Health and Human Services to give priority in federal funding to such research and trials, according to the text of the bill.

"The Patients First Act provides hope for millions of Americans," said Lipinski at the news conference. "I can personally appreciate hope because I have juvenile diabetes which I must monitor and treat several times a day.

"This bill ensures that finding cures for diabetes and other more devastating diseases is correctly prioritized, while proving that we don't have to choose between advancing medical techniques and contentious life issues," he added.

Jaider Furlan Abbud, a citizen of Brazil who also has juvenile diabetes, spoke about a treatment he received at the University of Sao Paulo using his own adult stem cells that allowed him to stop needing insulin to treat his diabetes.

Stephen Sprague of the New York borough of Staten Island talked about being cured of leukemia nearly 10 years ago following treatments using stem cells derived from umbilical-cord blood at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey.

"The issue of embryonic stem-cell research has become divisive, and when there are cures and human lives at stake, divisiveness is not a luxury that we have," said Forbes.

"This bill seeks to bridge political divides, to turn our focus to more pragmatic ways of encouraging scientific development in the field of stem cells, and to devote our energies and our resources on the common goal shared by both sides of the embryonic-stem-cell debate -- curing and treating patients," he said.

Rep. Christopher H. Smith, R-N.J., also spoke at the news conference, decrying the "false claims and exaggerated promises of embryo-killing research" that he said is gradually being replaced by "growing acceptance, appreciation and understanding that adult stem cells are highly efficacious and hold enormous potential."

Earlier in July the House approved an appropriations bill with an amendment, introduced by Smith and Rep. Artur Davis, D-Ala., that would allocate \$15 million in fiscal year 2008 to cord-blood-banking initiatives. Smith said treatments using cord blood have benefited approximately 8,000 patients with more than 70 diseases, including leukemia, sickle cell anemia and Hurler disease, in the past two years.

In New Jersey, Corzine said he would actively campaign for voters to support the November referendum on whether the state should borrow \$450 million to fund stem-cell research during the next 10 years. The state Senate earlier had approved \$230 million for that period.

"This ballot initiative represents a landmark economic investment that will create new jobs and spur new business ventures while bringing the potential of revolutionary life-saving treatments and cures to millions afflicted by some of the most devastating diseases and injuries," Corzine said as he signed the Stem-Cell Research Bond Act authorizing the referendum July 26.

New Jersey's Catholic bishops have opposed the use of state bonds to fund embryonic stem-cell research, saying that "the creation and destruction of human embryonic stem cells violate the sanctity of human life."

"However, we do advocate the use of adult (nonembryonic) stem cells that have been shown to offer promise in the fight to eradicate heartbreaking diseases that are debilitating and life-threatening," said a statement from the New Jersey

Catholic Conference, the bishops' public policy arm.

Meanwhile the Missouri Catholic Conference was continuing efforts to overturn the constitutional amendment, approved by 51 percent of the state's voters in November 2006, that codifies the protected status of stem-cell research, including that involving the destruction of embryos.

"Rather than funding life science research that destroys human life, the legislature should restore funding for basic human services that affirm human life, such as health coverage for the poor," the conference said in its 2007 legislative priorities.

The Associated Press reported in late July that efforts to fund some embryonic stem-cell research in the state had been thwarted by legislators and a prominent medical institute had halted a \$300 million expansion plan because of fears that the amendment might be overturned.

"Right now, you can't tell the amendment passed," the AP quoted Democratic state Sen. Chuck Graham, a supporter of the amendment, as saying. "People are running in the opposite direction."