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Conservative Party concerned about stem cell proposal

By ARIANA COHN
Legislative Gazette Staff Writer

The Conservative Party of New York expressed its objections with Gov. Eliot Spitzer's suggested \$2 billion in funding for the Stem Cell and Innovation Fund in a letter delivered to all state legislators prior to the Executive Budget announcement last Wednesday.

In the letter, state Chairman Michael R. Long said, "Gov. Spitzer has called for new spending in one area that gives us great concern." Long recognizes that funding for research could potentially provide cures for some diseases. However, certain ethical restraints must be put on the research when it comes at the expense of taxpayers' dollars, he said.

The restraints Long spoke of included a ban on embryonic stem cell research, human cloning and research on embryos that are destined to be destroyed. Long said, "It is never ethical to kill human life in the name of research. New York taxpayers should not be asked to fund research on embryos—to do so would violate ethical codes, the Hippocratic Oath, the Belmont Commission and the Nuremberg Code."

While Spitzer did not specify what type of stem cell research he wishes to include in the \$2 billion during his speech, he did propose that \$1.5 billion be spent on a Stem Cell and Innovation Fund Bond Act to be voted on in 2008, while \$500 million should be spent on operating funds, and \$100 million will be used as seed money to promote primary research between 2007 and 2008. The \$2 billion would be allocated over 11 years.

A common ethical concern Long talked about is the creation and destruction of human lives. "We have no problem with the other ways to help cure diseases, but to create a life for the purpose of science and have to destroy that life, we firmly believe, is a misuse of taxpayers," he said.

However, some argue that the comparison between embryonic research and abortion is unjustified. Susan Solomon, CEO and Co-Founder of the New York State Stem Cell Foundation, described the research in which a skin biopsy is taken from an individual and grown out so that the DNA can be extracted and later implanted in an egg which is either unfertilized or has had its nucleus removed.

"There is no sperm, no babies, no fetuses, no abortions. It is like making a vaccine—

which is done by combining a little bit of DNA from a virus. There's never been any fertilization," she said, "When people hear that, they say, 'Oh, then what's the problem?' We don't think there is one."

Several members of the Senate, including senators John Sabini, D-Queens, Toby Ann Stavisky, D, WF-Queens, Eric Schneiderman, D, WF-Bronx, John Sampson, D-Brooklyn, and Kevin Parker, D,WF-Brooklyn, have been working on legislation for the past three years to promote funding toward stem cell research. Liz Krueger, D,WF-Manhattan, sponsor of the bill which promotes stem cell research, introduced January 17, agrees that, "There should be no use of embryos for human cloning." Krueger modeled the bill after legislation passed in other states and in Europe. Included in it are specifications of how many days an embryonic cell can be used, and a declaration that human cloning as a result of stem cell research will be prohibited.

One of the highlights of Krueger's bill is that it explains exactly what stem cell research is. "It is very detailed—the definition of science and the use of stem cells. Definitions are everything. My bill is very consistent with the lead scientists in the country and with what kinds of boundaries should be appropriate" said Krueger.

Boundaries seem to be a main concern, shared by both legislators and researchers when it comes to the controversial issue of stem cell research. The New York State Stem Cell Foundation has already placed a ban on human cloning. "Therapeutic cloning is distinct from reproductive cloning—no one would support that," said Solomon, "The main academy of scientists condemns it. It's not anything that is going to go on."

Solomon described human cloning as an unrealistic option, labeling it a "fear tactic" that those opposed to stem cell research use to scare the public away from moving forward with research. However, human cloning is one component on the list of concerns of the Conservative Party.

The other main concern of the Conservative Party's concerns involves embryonic research, and the bond issue Spitzer is pushing for that will enable voters to decide whether it be allowed. "The governor, in his State of the State, said that he was going to float a bond issue legislators would pass and voters would vote on. Clearly in that would be money for embryonic stem cell research. The New York State Conservative Party firmly believes tax payers should not have to pay for this type of research," said Long.

Long believes the government should not get involved with research, and it should be left up to private sectors to provide their own funding. But Solomon described the difficulties private sectors have in receiving sufficient funds to support the ever-changing scientific field. "The science has moved so far ahead of the available public funding. Those of us in the private sector are really struggling to keep things going," she said.

In his first month of administration, Spitzer has already showed his enthusiasm to ensure that New York does not continue to fall behind other states in scientific research. He described his plans as, "Absolutely critical to our economic future." Solomon agreed, claiming, "We're a pluralistic society and everyone's entitled to their opinion. We need to be able to move forward so that we have better solutions."