

Conn.: \$45M in Stem Cell Fund Requests

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By DAVE COLLINS - Associated Press Writer © 2007 The Associated Press

ROCKY HILL, Conn. — Connecticut's stem cell research program is drawing a flurry of interest in its second year, with universities and small firms lining up for the \$10 million that is available in the latest round of funding.

The program has received 87 preliminary requests seeking nearly \$45 million for research projects based in the state, up from 75 last year when \$20 million was awarded, the Connecticut Stem Cell Research Advisory Committee learned Tuesday.

"You have a great number of people who are excited by stem cell research," said Nancy Rion of Connecticut Innovations Inc., a quasi-public state agency that administers the program. "There are some very exciting proposals."

Rion said the projects include efforts to cure cancer, Parkinson's disease and diabetes. Letters of interest in this year's funding were due last Saturday, while formal proposals must be submitted by Nov. 1.

The program, approved by the legislature and Gov. M. Jodi Rell in 2005, set aside \$100 million for Connecticut-based embryonic and adult stem cell research through 2015. After awarding the \$20 million last November, the committee will be handing out \$10 million a year for the next eight years.

Many other states have approved or are considering their own programs, with California's \$3 billion commitment leading the way.

On the federal government level, President Bush has vetoed two bills in the past two years that would have allowed federal funding of embryonic stem cell research, saying he could not support the deliberate destruction of human embryos.

The University of Connecticut and its health center submitted 60 of this year's 87 preliminary requests. Yale turned in 15 and the University of Hartford handed in one. Small biotech firms submitted six proposals.

"I feel exceptionally proud of this response," said Robert Mandelkern of West Hartford, a research advisory committee member and state coordinator of Parkinson's Action Network.

Under the program, UConn, Yale and others who received funding the first year are expected to get more money this year to continue their projects.

Dr. J. Robert Galvin, the state's public health commissioner and chairman of the advisory committee, said it is too early to assess the first projects to receive state funding. Researchers received the funding in March and are required to turn in progress reports next spring.

Dr. Gerald Fishbone, a committee member and radiologist at The Hospital of St. Raphael in New Haven, added: "I don't think there's going to be a cure for any diseases in the first year, the second year. The process takes longer than people suffering from diseases would like it to."

Researchers say embryonic stem cells are vital to finding cures for diseases because they can develop into all types of tissue. But many are opposed to the research because embryos must be destroyed to harvest human embryonic stem cells.

Committee members also said Connecticut's program is drawing international attention. A 12-member delegation from Connecticut, California, Texas and Maryland will be traveling to the United Kingdom next month to discuss stem cell research with their counterparts there.

"We really have enormous momentum now," Galvin said. "There's a lot of promising research."