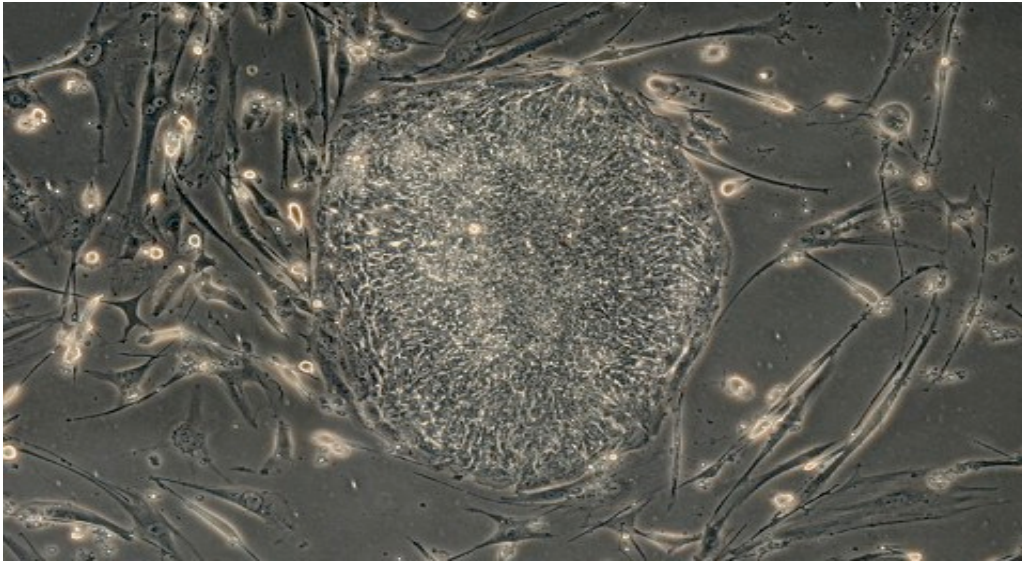


Stem Cell Breakthrough Hailed as End to Ethical Dilemma

March 9, 2009

Dr. Irving Weissman is so excited, he flew cross-country for the event. Larry Soler of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation will “Twitter” his impressions. Stem cell experts are all gushing about President Barack Obama’s decision to lift some restrictions on federal funding of human embryonic stem cell research later on Monday.



Picture: AFP

US President Barack Obama is due Monday, March 9, 2009, to scrap a ban on federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research, a move already delighting scientists and vexing conservatives. Following up on his campaign promise, Obama will sign an executive order to reverse the ban introduced by his predecessor George W. Bush eight years ago.

Researchers will be prominent in an audience of advocates and politicians invited to the White House announcement.

“I’ve been working and speaking out about the ban for about eight years, and now I want to be there,” said Weissman, director of Stanford University’s Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine Institute.

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“We can lift the bureaucracy that has been established to scrutinize every purchase by every lab, and move forward with this important research.”

In August 2001, then-president George W. Bush reversed a decision by the National Institutes of Health to allow federally funded researchers to work with human embryonic stem cells. Bush and others object to their use on ethical and religious grounds because the powerful cells come from days-old human embryos.

Bush said researchers could only use already-existing batches of the cells, which can morph into any cell or tissue type in the body. And they may use state or private funds for the work.

IMMEDIATE PROFITS

Michael West of Alameda, California-based biotech BioTime says his company stands to profit from Obama's decision almost immediately. It just bought dozens of stem cell batches, or lines, from a Chicago fertility clinic and wants to sell them to newly empowered researchers.

They come from embryos carrying the genes for cystic fibrosis, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, breast cancer, Huntington's disease and others -- embryos created via in vitro fertilization.

"It would be unethical to implant them, knowing you are going to create a child with a devastating disease," West said in a telephone interview.

But those cells will be perfect for studying these diseases in the hope of someday curing or preventing them. Under the Bush restrictions, federally funded researchers could not have touched them.

"Embryonic stem cells have this wonderful property of dividing without limit," said West.

Susan Solomon of the New York Stem Cell Foundation hopes Congress will work to lift the remaining restriction on human embryonic stem cell research.

An amendment that has been placed on the Health and Human Services Department's budget every year forbids federal funds to be used for research that directly involves human embryos. That means federally funded researchers cannot actually make human embryonic stem cells but have to buy them.

"The president is doing everything that he alone can do," Solomon said in an interview. "Hopefully he will provide Congress with the kind of environment that they need to do the right thing."

Solomon flew to Washington for the event over the weekend. She will join the JDRF's Soler, who has been assigned to send updates of the ceremony from his cell phone via Twitter, a social networking tool.