

California Stem Cell Report

OFFICIALLY BANNED BY CALIFORNIA'S \$3 BILLION STEM CELL AGENCY, THIS BLOG PROVIDES NEWS AND COMMENTARY ON PUBLIC POLICY RELATED TO THE CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE FOR REGENERATIVE MEDICINE(CIRM). DAVID JENSEN, A RETIRED CALIFORNIA NEWSMAN, HAS PUBLISHED THIS BLOG SINCE JANUARY 2005. HIS EMAIL ADDRESS IS DJENSEN@CALIFORNIASTEMCELLREPORT.COM.

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Zach Hall on Monday Morning at the White House



Zach Hall, the first president of the California stem cell agency and now a director of the **New York Stem Cell Foundation**, attended the ceremonies at the **White House** on Monday. Here is his account of the event and some of its implications. Our thanks to Hall (pictured at left) for providing the article.

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On a soft spring morning, a distinguished and festive group gathered at the East Entrance to the White House. It was a gathering of the tribe of embryonic stem cell research supporters – scientists, Washington officials, patients, and patient advocates, many of whom had been working for years for the day when the Presidential restrictions on stem cell research would be lifted. As we waited, we greeted colleagues, shared our excitement about the event, and began the first round of picture-taking. California was well-represented, with stem cell scientists **Irv Weissman** and **Renee Reijo-Pera** from Stanford; **Bob Klein**, Chairman of CIRM and author of **Proposition 71**; and CEO **Tom Okarma** from **Geron**. Leading stem cell scientists **Jamie Thomson** from Wisconsin, **Shinya Yamanaka** from the **Gladstone Institute** and Japan, **John Gearhart** from Pennsylvania and **George Daley** from **Harvard** were there, as were several Nobel Prize winners (**Mike Bishop** from **UCSF**, **Steven Chu**, the new Secretary of Energy, **Robert Horvitz**, **Eric Kandel**, **Harold Varmus**, **Peter Agre**) and other scientific notables (**Bruce Alberts**, **Eric Lander**, **Francis Collins**). Among the California patient advocates were long-time stem cell advocates, **Roman Reed** and his parents, **Gloria** and **Don**, and **Katie Hood** of the **Michael J. Fox Foundation**. A number of those present (**Alta Charo**, **Clive Svenson**, **John Wagner**, **Janet Rowland**) are well-known to CIRM as members of its Working Groups.

After passing through security, we entered the White House and, after a brief wait, streamed into the East Room where we were joined by a Congressional delegation including Speaker **Nancy Pelosi**, Senator

Zach Hall on Monday

Morning at the White House

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Diane Feinstein and Representative **Henry Waxman** from California, Senators **Tom Harkin** and **Orrin Hatch**, and Representatives **Mike Castle** and **Diana DeGette**. One entire wall was packed with TV cameramen, journalists and photographers, whose presence was made evident throughout the event by the constant chorus of camera clicks.

The ceremony began with the entry of seven distinguished scientists, Nobelists and others, who would stand behind President **Obama** as he signed the Executive Order for embryonic stem cell research and the Memorandum on scientific integrity, their presence a clear signal of the importance of science to his administration.

The President entered, bounding onto the stage to a prolonged standing ovation. His first words were: "Well, I'm excited, too." His speech was firm, clear and thoughtful, with the eloquence that we have come to expect from him. He was enthusiastic, but appropriately cautious about the promise of stem cell research, recognizing that "there is no finish line in the work of science." He acknowledged and expressed respect for those who oppose the research, but cited the strong majority of Americans who believe the research should go forward. President Obama then adroitly tied the reversal of the presidential restrictions on human embryonic stem cell research to his effort to restore scientific integrity to government, to listen to scientists even when ("especially when," as he added) it is inconvenient, and to "make scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology." Needless to say, these words were warmly received by those present. The President ended with a tribute to **Christopher** and **Dana Reeve** and to the many people who have worked tirelessly on behalf of embryonic stem cell research.

The President then moved to the desk and signed the documents using multiple pens, as is the custom. "I've learned to extend my signature," he said. After shaking the hands of those near the front (I was delighted to be one of them), the President left. Still excited and savoring the moment, the group lingered, reluctant to leave, until White House attendants pointed us to the door.

The President's remarks, as well as the stem cell document itself, contained several small surprises. The general expectation among the stem cell community was that the Executive Order would permit federal funding of research on stem cell lines as long as they were made from surplus IVF embryos using money from private or state sources. The Executive Order, however, makes no specific mention of what can and cannot be funded, but directs the **NIH** to provide guidance on that point within 120 days, in light of "widely recognized guidelines." This leaves open the possibility that the NIH could fund research on embryonic stem cell lines made by other means, including somatic cell nuclear transfer, as long as federal money was not used to make the lines. The use of federal funds to actually make stem cell lines is, in any case, illegal under the **Dickey-Wicker** amendment which prohibits any research that results in harm or destruction of a

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- [The Niche, a stem cell blog by Monya Baker of Nature magazine, with commentary from time to time on California issues](#)
- [Nature Reports Stem Cells, Nature magazine's online reports on stem cell research globally](#)
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human embryo.

The second issue concerns whether or not legislation is desirable. The White House had indicated previously that this was a matter for the Congress to decide, but in his speech he suggested that his former colleagues "still have plenty of work to do." Presumably this is encouragement to pass a new version of the **Castle-DeGette** bill, which allows federal funding for new lines made from IVF embryos, but might be taken as a reference to the Dickey-Wicker amendment. A legislative battle over Dickey-Wicker would be much more difficult and more polarizing than a revised Castle-DeGette bill.

In the end, one can only admire the President's eagerness to engage the scientific community in solving the many problems that the nation faces, the use of stem cells among them. To be there as a scientist, among so many distinguished colleagues and supporters of biomedical research, and to see the President demonstrate his commitment to our shared enterprise, both in word and deed, was truly inspiring. I felt privileged to be at the White House on this historic occasion.

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