



Stem-cell group begins campaign Supporters of embryonic research to give LifeSavers to lawmakers

By PATRICK JACKSON

Tuesday, March 6, 2007

Supporters of legislation that would regulate government-funded research using embryonic stem cells said they plan to speak up for what they contend is the silent majority on the issue.

"We represent the 70 percent of Delawareans who support this life-saving research," said Stephanie Hansen, the chairwoman of Stem Cell Go, set up last year after state lawmakers failed to pass a similar bill. They intend to counter "A Rose and a Prayer," a coalition of the Catholic Church, social conservatives and conservative Protestant churches.

At a news conference launching its bid to pass Senate Bill 5, Stem Cell Go backers started filling a jar with LifeSavers. They plan to give lawmakers the candy to counter the roses the opposition group sent last year.

A Rose and a Prayer and similar groups contend that embryonic stem-cell research is akin to murder because the cells cannot be used without destroying an embryo. They generally support what is known as adult stem-cell research because those cells come from bone marrow and umbilical-cord blood.

The speakers Monday said that won't get the job done.

"It would be great if you could retrain, recalibrate and reprogram adult stem cells to do the same things as embryonic stem cells," said Bernice Schacter, a board member of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society who is living with MS. "We don't have time to wait to see if that can happen. We need to do research and we need to be doing it now."

Among the people putting LifeSavers in a jar was 12-year-old Allie Dietz, who has Type 1 diabetes and depends on an insulin pump. Allie's dad, Newark restaurant owner David Dietz, said he hopes his group learned from last year's failure.

"For our daughter, it's a matter of life and death," Dietz said. "I think last year a lot of us took for granted that it would pass because it made so much sense. We have learned from

that and we have a group that represents a great cross-section of Delaware."

Stem Cell Go says it favors S.B. 5 because it sets regulations on government-funded research and bans human reproductive cloning and trafficking in embryos for profit.

Sen. Robert L. Venables, D-Laurel, has promised to bring his bill up quickly when lawmakers return to Dover next week.

Embryonic stem-cell research supporters, including Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., said that form of study holds great long-term potential to cure diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and MS, but adult stem-cell potential is more limited. Supporters say embryonic stem cells are essentially human blanks that have yet to specialize and can therefore be "coaxed" into becoming any type of cell.

Supporters also dispute claims that adult cells have already been developed into cures for 72 types of disease.

"It's simply wrong," Castle said, acknowledging that adult cells have been developed to cure some blood ailments. "I think it's important to understand that all of us support continuing adult stem-cell research, but we also believe it's important to continue embryonic stem-cell research, too."

Under the bill's provisions, couples who choose to donate frozen embryos that are stored at in vitro fertilization clinics and slated for destruction as medical waste must do so voluntarily and only after their options, including giving up unused embryos for adoption as so-called "snowflake babies," have been explained to them. They must sign consent forms to give up the embryos for research.

Backers of the bill say that's an important point.

"It's revocable at any point," said Schacter, who worked as a biomedical researcher before contracting MS. "But the decision has been made. These are embryos that would otherwise be brought to room temperature, bleached and put out with the medical waste, but which could be used for researching cures."

Copyright ©2007, The News Journal.