

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Stem Cells, Part 2

I have picked up more knowledge than I thought existed in the world about stem cells – and all of it in a period of a few weeks. Much of the information came from listening to speakers during the legislative debate.

Last week's Byline outlined the stem cell issue as the legislature prepared to debate an authorization bill. Now that the debate has taken place in both the senate and the house, today's column will fill in some of the blanks from the first article.

First, the outcome of the debate. Both the senate and house approved bills to authorize research on embryonic stem cells. Both bills state that the cells can be derived from extra embryos created for in vitro fertilization or through the process that results from transferring the nucleus of a human cell into a human egg. The latter process is called either somatic cell nuclear transfer or therapeutic cloning. The bills are not alike, so at this time a conference committee must resolve differences to present a single bill. Neither bill approves state funding for the research.

Second, hot topics in the debate. A last minute flurry of activity developed after respected women's advocates raised concerns about the risks to women who donate eggs for research. A reason for the concern is that hormonal therapies to stimulate multiple egg production do not carry FDA approval for that use. The house responded by adding language strengthening informed consent requirements and mandating that the health of donors be monitored into the future.

Legislators who reject all experimentation on embryos moved to substitute a different form of research, but the substitution was defeated. A second substitution, which I supported, limited research to in vitro embryos, deleting cloning from the bill. That proposal failed by a vote of 110 to 45.

Legislators spoke with emotion and passion. One talked of a grandchild with neurofibromatosis, a disease she feels could be cured by the research. Another said that although his sister has juvenile diabetes, another disease highlighted as possibly curable through therapeutic cloning, he cannot support that research. Nationally the opposition to embryonic stem cell research is led by pro-life forces, but last week a senator who identified himself as a pro-life Democrat led the debate in support of the bill.

It's hard not to consider that the claims for this new technology may be overblown. Only once in the world, after all, has an embryo been grown from somatic cell transfer. That is a far reach from the assertion by some debaters that 80 to 100 million lives could be saved if only we would vote yes to that technology.

Though I voted against the final bill, I agree that it will clarify the status of research. Existing state law states that any embryonic research can be conducted only with the approval of the district attorney with jurisdiction over the research site. Whatever you think of the specifics, it makes sense that the legislature is appropriate arbiter.

The final senate vote was 35 to 2; the house voted 117 to 37, and the same vote is likely to approve the compromise bill offered by the conference committee. The margins are significant because Governor Romney is expected to veto the bill, and a two-thirds vote is required in each house to enact the bill over his veto.

That should be the end of the debate, but issues at the State House tend to go on forever. This topic will soon return with a new focus: should scarce economic development money fund the research. Stay tuned.