Research Ban Should Be Overturned

By Rep. Tammy Baldwin

Did you hear the one about the doctor talking with a just-diagnosed Alzheimer's patient who says, "I have good news and bad news for you? The good news is we stand on the threshold of dramatic treatments and possibly a cure for your disease. The bad news is, the government is restricting our research." As you may have guessed, this is no joke. It's a story being played out every day in doctors' offices around the country to patients newly diagnosed with such catastrophic conditions as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, ALS, juvenile diabetes, spinal cord injuries and countless other illnesses.

Understanding these processes could provide insights into the causes of birth defects, genetic abnormalities and a multitude of diseases.

Scientific breakthroughs have brought new hope to patients and their families by isolating and then propagating a form of human cells, known as "stem cells." University of Wisconsin at Madison professor James Thomson was the first to grow and sustain human embryonic stem cells in a lab. This advance was earth-shaking. When human embryonic stem cells were introduced to the world, then-National Institutes of Health Director Harold Varmus told a Senate hearing, "It is not too unrealistic to say that this research has the potential to revolutionize the practice of medicine and improve the quality and length of life. There is almost no realm of medicine that might not be touched by this innovation."

This research provides the opportunity to study the growth and differentiation of individual cells. Understanding these processes could provide insights into the causes of birth defects, genetic abnormalities and a multitude of diseases. If normal development were better understood, it might be possible to prevent or correct some of these conditions. There is no doubt among scientists that this research holds amazing potential.

Despite all of this promise, the federal government limits federal funds for embryonic stem-cell research. Specifically, President Bush declared that researchers who receive federal funding could only work with human embryonic stem lines that were derived before 9 p.m. on Aug. 9, 2001. At the time, he assured the public that more than 60 colonies of stem cells would be eligible for federal research funds.

File Photo

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Yet this has clearly not been the case. Of the original 78 total stem-cell lines that were potentially eligible for federally funded research, only 15 are actually available to researchers today. Reports issued in early

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Should restrictions on controversial research be lifted?

New Stem-Cell Research Brings Great Promise

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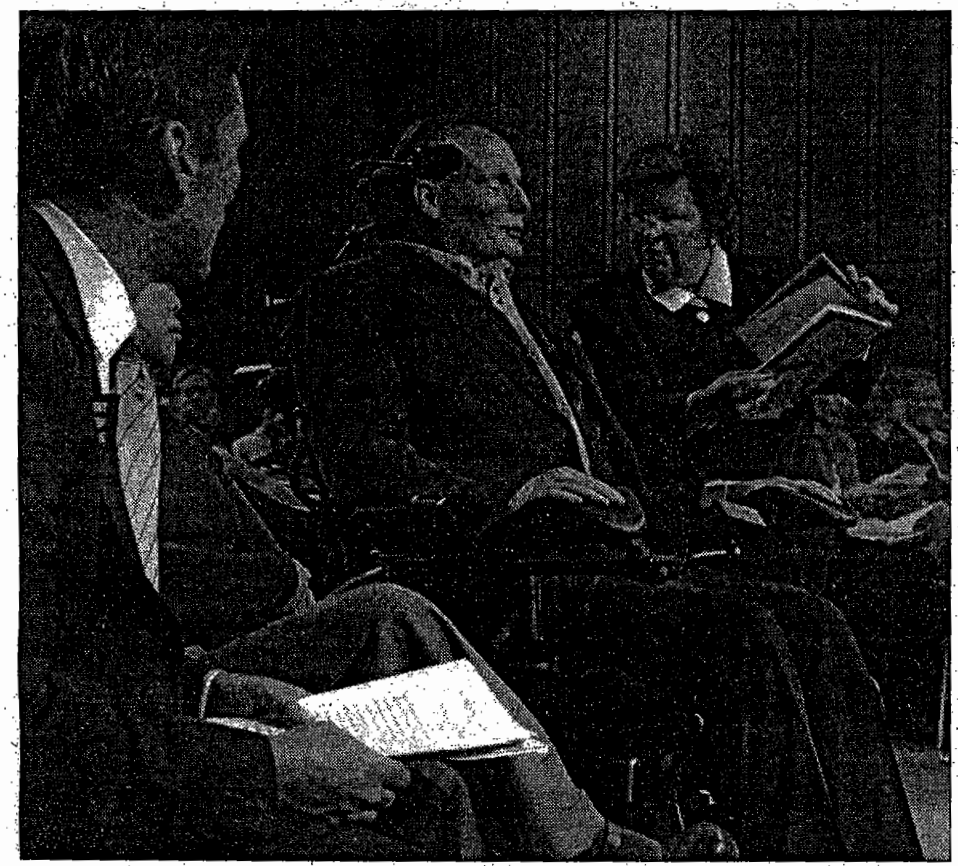
March confirm that at least 16 of the 78 approved stem-cell colonies have either died or failed in their laboratory dishes and many others are unavailable; so an already restricted resource for scientists is further restricted. This is simply unacceptable.

In addition to stifling our scientific progress, this hostile policy threatens the very foundation of our country's scientific community — our brainpower. Because the Bush stem-cell policy is so severe in limiting stem-cell research, fewer and fewer scientists are choosing to enter this research field. Understandably, they are unwilling to risk their careers by focusing on a research field that is already restricted and could be abruptly canceled or deemed unlawful. This is a harsh departure from our nation's tradition of nurturing and supporting promising research. While we impede progress in this area, other countries are actively encouraging the development of stem-cell research labs. It is truly regrettable that we are allowing this opportunity for scientific advancement to pass us by.



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Sen. Barbara Mikulski speaks with Christopher Reeve before a 2002 hearing on cloning and regenerative medicine.

Fortunately for science, new colonies of human embryonic stem cells, developed with private funding, are being created and freely shared with scientists around the world. This is good news, and I am hopeful that these new lines will lead to exciting new discoveries. Nevertheless, I remain deeply concerned because scientists who are federally funded still will not be able to conduct research on these lines simply because they were created after the president's arbitrary cutoff date.

In the past decade, Congress has rightly demonstrated a strong commitment to biomedical research by doubling funding for the National Institutes of Health. Today, the NIH is funded at nearly $28 billion. Yet, because of the Bush administration's irrationally imposed deadline regarding stem-cell research funding, we are cutting off some of the most promising research.

Last year, more than $250 million was spent on NIH-funded adult stem-cell research (widely believed to hold less promise than embryonic stem-cell research), while only about $10 million was spent on embryonic stem-cell research.

This senseless policy must be revoked. There are simply too many possibilities that stem-cell research holds to allow these restrictions to continue. Every day that goes by, more men, women and children are suffering and dying from illnesses that stem-cell research may one day prevent, treat or cure.

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Stem-cell research has wide bipartisan support both in and out of government. It has the support of the American Medical Association, the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, the American Bar Association and former first lady Nancy Reagan, among others. Most recently, more than 100 Members of the House of Representatives, on both sides of the aisle, signed a letter to President Bush urging him to expand his restrictive policy.

It is time to overturn the Bush stem-cell policy. We simply cannot afford not to aggressively explore the possibilities that stem-cell research may unlock. There is just too much at stake.

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