SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH HEARING ENTITLED "STEM CELL SCIENCE: THE FOUNDATION FOR FUTURE CURES"

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May 8, 2008

Stem cell research holds great promise for better understanding and treatment of a broad range of debilitating and deadly diseases and conditions, including Parkinson’s disease, cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, diabetes, and multiple sclerosis. Yet this promise is currently imperiled by politics.

Scientists primarily work with two kinds of stem cells: adult stem cells and embryonic stem cells. Current science indicates that adult and embryonic stem cells each differ in important ways and therefore, both should be examined.

Yet, despite the well-documented benefits of embryonic stem cell research and pleas from the scientific community, the Administration has adopted research restrictions that inhibit the ability of scientists to fully explore the potential of embryonic stem cells. In this Congress, the House and Senate have sent the President – twice – bipartisan legislation that would lift these restrictions. And both times, President Bush has vetoed this legislation.

Researchers in my own State of Michigan have been doubly hamstrung by Federal and State limitations. The University of Michigan has an impressive Life Sciences Institute focused on stem cell research, and a prominent University Center for Stem Cell Biology. In 2003, under the capable leadership of Dr. Max Wicha, who directs the Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Michigan, our scientists discovered breast cancer stem cells, and last year found stem cells in pancreatic cancer. These are particularly noteworthy and impressive accomplishments, given the limited funding available to the University. With State or Federal dollars unavailable for this research, the University scrambles to support this groundbreaking research with private funds.

I
do not profess to know which stem cell lines are the most valuable, which ones offer the most promise, or which can give the greatest hope to those living with debilitating conditions and diseases. I defer to the experts on those questions such as to Dr. Zerhouni, Director of the NIH, who in 2007 stated:

"It is in the best interest
of our scientists, our science, and our country that we find ways, that the nation finds a way to go full-speed across adult and embryonic stem cells equally. From my standpoint, it is clear today that American science will be better served, and the nation would be better served, if we let our scientists have access to more cell lines."

I
defer to the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which stated in 2002 that: "Studies of both embryonic and adult human stem cells will be required to most efficiently advance the scientific and therapeutic potential of regenerative medicine. Research on both adult and embryonic human stem cells should be pursued."

None of us can guarantee to
those suffering from Parkinson’s disease, spinal cord injuries, or multiple sclerosis that embryonic stem cell research will bring success. But we can guarantee that if we let politics, not science, guide our efforts, we consign ourselves to failure.

I
thank Chairman Pallone for holding today’s hearing, and I commend Rep. DeGette for her dedication and commitment to this issue. Finally, I wish to thank the NIH Director, Dr. Zerhouni, for rearranging his schedule in order to be here today. I look forward to the testimony of our expert witnesses on the current state of stem cell research and science.

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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