

U.S. is falling behind in key area of biomedical research -- June 2006

By: Congressman Mike Castle

Two weeks ago, on May 24, I celebrated a special anniversary with colleagues and patient advocacy groups in Washington D.C. It was the one-year anniversary of the passage of my bill, H.R. 810., the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act which would establish strong ethical standards for conducting federally funded stem cell research at the National Institutes of Health.

As we sought to put pressure on the U.S. Senate to consider this legislation, we stood outside the Capitol and listened to empowering stories of real patients who are waiting for the day when stem cell research can possibly help cure or treat those diseases that affect them or their family. One woman spoke on behalf of her family whose husband was diagnosed with diabetes as an adult and whose two children live with juvenile diabetes and the countless needle sticks associated with it, everyday. Another mother spoke on behalf of her young daughter who was paralyzed from the waist down in a car accident last spring. In fact, it only takes a few moments with these individuals to realize that the fight for federally funded, ethical, regulated embryonic stem cell research is so critical.

A week after the rally, I participated in a fact-finding trip to London, England which made it even more clear to me why we need to keep pushing in the United States to ensure that we do not fall further behind in this form of medical research.

During the trip, I learned more about what we should be doing here in the United States to advance stem cell research. We need to have tight regulation and ethical oversight like the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority in Britain to establish a clear line of what is permitted and what is prohibited. It is important that we know what investigative projects scientists are working on to improve coordination throughout the country and to advance science. We need to establish a stem cell bank so all researchers can have access to the best stem cell lines, and finally, it is necessary to ensure that those reviewing applications for stem cell research are making objective decisions, not political ones. H.R. 810 gives the power to the NIH to do all of these things and to ensure strict informed consent for embryo donation and that is why it is so important that action takes place on this legislation in the Senate as soon as possible.

I also walked away from my meetings in England with further ideas for the comprehensive advancement of stem cell research here in the United States. Some of these ideas include investing in researchers to prevent brain drain and funding of all types of stem cell research. I would also like to see a plan implemented to invest in infrastructure, such as building centers for excellence. We must coordinate all research, so that it's not conducted on a state-by-state basis. Finally, we need to establish partnerships with the biomedical and pharmaceutical industries and perhaps most importantly, create competition to draw out the most talented researchers and brightest ideas.

It is evident that more and more people of this country understand the importance and possible positive implications of this research. In fact, 72 percent of Americans polled support stem cell research using embryos created for the purposes of in vitro fertilization that would otherwise be discarded.

I know that there are mountains ahead, such as the White House who has said they will veto the bill, but I continue to

have hope through the strength and resilience of the people that work everyday to get H.R. 810 passed. Passage of this legislation would ensure our best and brightest scientists have access to the stem cell lines they need to conduct cutting edge research that may one day improve the lives of the 1 in 3 million Americans who are suffering from devastating diseases like Alzheimer's, diabetes, Parkinson's, ALS and cancer.