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JEFF BEIERMANN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Published Friday November 20, 2009

Expanded stem-cell research OK'd

By Jeffrey Robb and Leslie Reed
WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

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LINCOLN — The NU Board of Regents kept open new possibilities in embryonic stem cell research today, voting 4-4 on a resolution that would have restricted the university's research involving those stem cells.

Regent Jim McClurg of Lincoln, a businessman and scientist who made his career in the pharmaceutical industry, cast the deciding vote against the resolution, preventing its passage with a tie vote.

The vote came after months of effort by anti-abortion groups to limit the research to embryonic stem cells approved under the administration of former President George W. Bush.

Their efforts predate the 2008 election, when Nebraska Right to Life and other groups supported candidates who would form a majority on the eight-member board to oppose expansion of the research. With the election of Regent Tim Clare of Lincoln, the anti-abortion groups thought they had assembled a five-vote majority who would limit the research only to the so-called Bush lines.

McClurg, 64, of Lincoln had the endorsement of Nebraska Right to Life when he was elected to the board in 2006. However, McClurg said this week that he would not make a decision before hearing today from all sides.

NU President J.B. Milliken addressed the regents today, recommending that they oppose any effort to impose further restrictions beyond what are in place today. He said appropriate policies are in place and further restrictions would limit the opportunity to make life-saving discoveries and would risk harming the university's reputation.

NU officials say a vote to restrict stem cell research would make it more difficult to recruit scientists and compete for federal research money. Supporters of the resolution say the university should focus on adult stem cell research and a process that involves replicating embryonic stem cells.

The regents heard passionate arguments on both sides of the issue today.

Retired physician Alan Worth, who has multiple sclerosis, urged the regents not to yield to religious authorities. "We entrust the university to prepare our young people for the future and to help discover and create that future," Worth said.

Rick Kolkman of North Platte said the resolution would stop the University of Nebraska Medical Center's momentum

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toward becoming a beacon medical center. He said he takes exception to people who want their religious beliefs to replace university policy. "Why are their beliefs better than mine?" asked Kolkman, who added that he is religious, too, and is against abortion.

Dr. John Safranek, a Nebraska physician, said supporters of the resolution do not want to see any one religious tradition upheld. He said the restriction would acknowledge that an embryo is an embodiment of a human being. "Each one of us has been a human being at every point of our existence," he said.

David Nability of Omaha said research dollars on embryonic stem cells are only a small slice of the total research funding available. If the research is restricted, he said, it won't have much economic impact.

The e-mails have been flying across Nebraska as the adversaries in the stem cell battle prepared for today's critical vote.

The pro-research Nebraska Coalition for Lifesaving Cures has been running radio and newspaper advertising and prerecorded "robo" telephone calls, urging supporters to ask the regents to vote against the resolution.

The group has placed advertisements in The World-Herald every day this week. One features former Husker football All-American Rik Bonness, whose two sons have Type 1 diabetes. "The Board of Regents is being pressured .??. to ban some of the most promising avenues of research," the ads say.

The Nebraska Coalition for Ethical Research, which opposes embryonic stem cell research, is airing radio advertising urging the regents to vote for the resolution. "We love stem cell research. .??. We just don't want embryos destroyed to do it," those ads say.

With Legislative Bill 606 last year, the Nebraska Legislature barred state funds and facilities from being used to destroy or clone embryos for research, but otherwise agreed to allow the stem cell research under federal guidelines.

While president, Bush restricted human embryonic stem cell research to pre-existing lines of stem cells as of August 2001. After President Barack Obama took office this year, those guidelines were changed to allow the approval of additional lines of stem cells.

HOW THEY VOTED

IN FAVOR of restricting embryonic stem cell research: Howard Hawks, Tim Clare, Bob Phares, Randy Ferlic

AGAINST restricting research: Jim McClurg, Bob Whitehouse, Chuck Hassebrook, Kent Schroeder

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