

STEM-CELL RESEARCH

UNMC can move forward

Over the years, Nebraska has taken a careful, reasoned approach to the stem-cell issue.

In 2001, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents agreed that NU should follow federal guidelines on stem-cell research.

In the same spirit, the Legislature voted 48-0 in 2008 to approve consensus legislation, Legislative Bill 606, that was negotiated and sponsored by a Catholic state senator from Omaha and received support from pro-life groups as well as NU. Gov. Dave Heineman signed LB 606 into law.

LB 606 commendably allowed NU to proceed with stem-cell research as long as it was kept within sensible ethical boundaries. Under it, no NU research can destroy human embryos, and creating cloned embryos for research or reproduction is forbidden.

Lawmakers stated at the time that LB 606 was intended to provide a reasonable compromise so that the stem-cell issue would no longer remain an ongoing issue without resolution for state policy-makers.

The NU regents have been asked to prohibit NU from using new stem-cell lines available under the current guidelines from the National Institutes of Health. But there is no need for such a break in NU policy. After all, the current NIH guidelines meet the sensible ethical parameters under LB 606.

Those NIH guidelines forbid the creation or destruction of embryos. They prohibit the creation of embryos solely for research. They forbid the creation of embryos via cloning.

In addition, the current NIH guidelines require embryo donors to be informed of their options regarding embryos. The guidelines require that embryo donors not receive any financial benefit from commercial development from stem-cell research.

Within those restrictions, the guidelines allow this important research to move forward. Chancellor Harold Maurer of the University of Nebraska Medical Center — himself a distinguished medical researcher in childhood cancer — describes in detail how embryonic stem-cell research is part of an array of advanced study that can result in vital medical benefits for diabetes, Alzheimer's and heart ailments.

"That's where the future is," Maurer says. "The university has to be permitted to pursue these critical lines of research for the future. Otherwise we will be locked out of finding medical benefits for the people of Nebraska and beyond."

A prohibition on using cell lines allowed under current NIH guidelines, Maurer says, would hamstring UNMC, shutting off the opportunity to apply for any of the \$170 million available in federal funds for embryonic stem-cell research. Such a situation, he says, would deter some scientific researchers elsewhere from applying for open positions at UNMC.

"We have tremendous momentum," Maurer says, noting the remarkable 10-year increase in UNMC's research funding — which not only benefits the university but the Omaha economy as well. An essay on the More Commentary page today points to a variety of impressive research projects at UNMC. Maurer also notes UNMC's multiple efforts to boost medical care in all parts of the state.

"Will we become one of the world's best academic centers or not?" Maurer says. "And will we be able to serve Nebraskans as they need to be served in the future as we go through these changes in biomedical research?"

The answer to those questions needs to be "yes." The NU regents can aid that forward movement by allowing UNMC to proceed using the NIH guidelines. That would be consistent with the sensible approach Nebraska has previously taken on this issue.