



# University Weighs Tighter Limits on Stem Cell Research

By **MONICA DAVEY**  
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LINCOLN, Neb. — In an unusual pushback against [President Obama's expansion of federal financing](#) of human embryonic [stem cell](#) research, the [University of Nebraska](#) is considering restricting its stem cell experiments to cell lines approved by President [George W. Bush](#).

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Angie Rizzino, a professor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, says research into embryonic stem cells is crucial.

The university's board of regents is scheduled to take up the matter on Friday, and if it approves the restrictions — some opponents of the research say they have the votes, though others remain doubtful — the University of Nebraska would become the first such state institution in the country to impose limits on stem cell research that go beyond what state and federal laws allow, university officials say.

For weeks, the Nebraska board of regents has been the focus of a fierce campaign by opponents of embryonic stem cell research, most recently by a flood of e-mail and telephone calls, a petition drive and radio advertisements.

The effort, which is being met with an equally heated push by supporters, is a new front in the battle over the politically contentious research: It is being fought before a public university's governing board, not a state legislature or on a ballot measure, where opponents have taken their fights before. "This could be another possible tool," said [David Prentice](#), senior fellow for life sciences at the [Family Research Council](#).

Nebraska law bars the destruction of embryos for research but allows researchers to follow federal standards in embryonic stem cell research. The proposal before the

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Chip Maxwell, executive director of the Nebraska Coalition for Ethical Research, says scientists should focus on adult stem cells.

regents would permit university researchers to work with as many as 21 cell lines that Mr. Bush approved in 2001, assuming they are deemed eligible by federal health authorities, but would close the door on research involving hundreds of cell lines created since 2001 from unused embryos at fertility clinics that the Obama administration could make eligible for federal financing.

Advocates of the research, including the university's president, worry that the restrictions would make it nearly impossible to attract researchers of regenerative medicine or grant money in the field, and some fear it could send a deeply disturbing signal about the broader academic climate here.

The university is one of [scores](#) across the country that engage in human embryonic stem cell research, which attracted about \$88 million in federal financing in 2008. Some \$3.2 million in federal money is supporting research projects that include such stem cell work at the University of Nebraska. "It would taint this university for a long time," said [Dr. Harold M. Maurer](#), chancellor of the University of Nebraska [Medical Center](#) in Omaha, which conducts stem cell research.

Because of the uncertainty over Friday's vote, Dr. Maurer said, the medical center has postponed efforts to compete for billions of dollars in federal stimulus money for future studies and efforts to attract a new leader of the center's regenerative medicine program have been slowed. "They won't come unless we have approval to do stem cell research," he said.

For a field that has been a matter of ethical debate for years because embryos are destroyed to create stem cell lines, the looming showdown here is being watched closely on both sides of the national debate. Supporters, including some of the nation's best-known scientists in the field, have sent letters advocating for the research.

The battle has pitted two powerful forces against each other: [abortion](#) opponents in a conservative state with a significant Roman Catholic population, and the University of Nebraska system, which includes a flagship campus of 24,000 students in Lincoln.

A tense yet scientifically complex fight is playing out here on radio programs, [newspaper opinion pages](#) and in [e-mail](#) messages cramming the in-boxes of regents' computers.

In a way, the fight began 10 years ago, when it became publicly known that the university's medical center was conducting research that used tissue from aborted fetuses. Sides were taken, committees were formed and legislation was introduced, but the rift over what constituted ethical research mainly grew.

Then, in 2008, lawmakers passed a [law limiting the research](#) in Nebraska, in a way that resembles some of the federal limits, in what some say they had hoped was the last word on the matter. But at the university, thanks to the election of a new regent, Tim Clare, in late 2008, opponents of embryonic stem cell research believe they have secured a 5-to-3 majority on such matters, said Julie Schmit-Albin, executive director of Nebraska Right

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The board of regents, with eight voting members, is one of only a handful of public university systems in the nation selected by election rather than appointment.

Mr. Clare and his opponent in the election had clashed over stem cell research, each issuing campaign material stating his position: "100 percent Pro-Life," declared a brochure for Mr. Clare with an image of a mother nuzzling an infant. "Supports ethical research that protects human life," it said.

Technically, whatever the regents do, no embryos will be destroyed at the University of Nebraska because of state law. The cell lines used here have been created by other scientists and can now be copied.

"But we don't want our state medical school increasing the demand for the destruction of embryos elsewhere," said Chip Maxwell, executive director of the Nebraska Coalition for Ethical Research, one of the groups on both sides that have grown out of this long battle.

Because embryonic stem cells can transform into nearly any sort of tissue, they have been viewed as having potential to offer hope in treating illnesses like [diabetes](#) or [Lou Gehrig's disease](#).

Mr. Maxwell and others say scientists should focus on adult stem cells, which do not require the destruction of embryos, and a recently discovered process that appears to reprogram adult stem cells to mimic the flexible properties of embryonic stem cells.

But [Angie Rizzino](#), a professor at the medical center who works with both human embryonic stem cells and the reprogrammed cells, said both forms of research remain crucial. The reprogrammed cells, he said, are far from "ready for prime time."

"You have a group pushing on this who do not understand the science," Professor Rizzino said.

As the regents' vote on the matter has drawn closer, pressure is mounting. The university's top administrators, including President J. B. Milliken, have told the regents that they support allowing the university to abide by widened federal limits.

Last Friday, four regents, including Mr. Clare, who is the newest among them and who said he was facing 230 unopened e-mail messages on the issue on a recent evening, revealed the resolution limiting the research that they will consider on Friday.

Jim McClurg, a fifth regent who has received the endorsement of Nebraska Right to Life, a group that asks candidates their position on such research, has not said publicly how he will vote.

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