

# Courier News – December 4, 2005

## Voting public needs facts on stem-cell research

---

New Jersey voters may find themselves voting in next year's November general election on a \$230 million bond referendum for stem-cell research.

The referendum is part of an initiative by acting Gov. Richard J. Codey that aims to make New Jersey a leader in stem-cell research. The initiative also includes a \$150 million research center at Rutgers. The governor is seeking approval for his proposals in the current lame-duck legislative session.

The purpose of the initiative is to bolster the state's economy and allow doctors to some day replace cells that are lost or damaged by ailments such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and spinal-cord injuries.

To explain the science of regenerative medicine, as it is called, the New Jersey Stem Cell Research and Education Foundation sponsored a program at Watchung Hills Regional High School in Warren last week.

Two young quadriplegics, one of them Carl Riccio, a Watchung Hills alumnus injured in a high-school wrestling accident, spoke about the promise of stem-cell research for the treatment of spinal cord injuries. The foundation hopes it will be the first of many such presentations.

We applaud the efforts of the foundation to educate the public -- and particularly the state's future leaders. This is an emerging science, using the building blocks of the body's tissues to develop cures. In part because of the complexity of the science, it would be easy for the public to take a position based on vague generalities rather than informed opinion.

Officials of the foundation said, for instance, that abortion foes often oppose all forms of stem-cell research, when in fact there are different approaches.

Embryonic stem-cell research requires the destruction of days-old embryos to harvest stem cells. This is controversial because the Catholic Church and abortion foes argue that the blastocyst, or early embryo, comprises a human life. So it was not surprising that one student in a questionnaire submitted after last week's program asked, "Does stem-cell research kill babies?"

But adult stem-cell research involves cells from bone marrow, blood and umbilical cords. It does not require destruction of embryos.

Moreover, the science of stem-cell research is evolving at a rapid pace. New techniques are being developed that allow stem-cell lines to be perpetuated without the destruction of embryos. But these new techniques cannot be understood -- and therefore garner public support -- without knowledge of the science involved.

The foundation also is playing a vital role in bringing together the institutional players in the state's stem-cell research initiative. While California's \$3 billion stem-cell initiative has become bogged down in in-fighting among institutions involved and lawsuits filed by abortion foes, the foundation is creating a cooperative platform that promises to vault New Jersey into a leadership role.

There are surely ethical concerns -- witness this month's scandal over women selling eggs to a South Korean stem-cell scientist. But these issues can be most effectively addressed through the kind of institutional collaboration the foundation is attempting to foster.

Under the influence of the right and of the current administration, which opposes embryonic stem-cell research, the United States, which was once in the forefront of stem-cell research, is falling behind the rest of the world. But thanks to the commitment of Codey, the progressive mind set of the state's electorate and the leadership of the foundation, it may not be too late for New Jersey to take its place as a leader in stem-cell research, with attendant benefits to the state's economy, its scientific prestige and the health of its residents.