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Stem-cell debate renewed in wake of Reagan's death

By Anne C. Mulkern
Denver Post Staff Writer**Washington**

- Colorado Congressman Mark Udall watched Parkinson's disease steal his father's ability to walk, dress, feed himself and, most excruciatingly of all, talk to his family.



Post file / Glen Martin

Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Denver, had help from her diabetic daughter, Frannie, when she campaigned in 2002. DeGette staunchly advocates federal aid for embryonic stem-cell research.

Rep. Diana DeGette spent hours in the emergency room after her daughter, Frannie, 10, suffered convulsions from insulin shock related to her treatment for Type I diabetes.

Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell lost his father to Alzheimer's disease.

All three support increasing federal funding and support for embryonic stem-cell research. Like many members of Congress, they understand Nancy Reagan's newfound advocacy for stem-cell research because they too have experienced debilitating and life-threatening diseases in their families.

The stem-cell issue gained new momentum in Congress last week after the death of former President Ronald Reagan.

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lot to me and to my family and to a lot of these people who are battling these terrible diseases right now," said Udall, a Democrat.

Morris Udall, an Arizona congressman who was 57 when Parkinson's was diagnosed, died in 1998, seven years after he had fallen and lapsed into a vegetative state.

Researchers say embryonic stem cells, which have the potential to grow into 220 different human cells, could theoretically be used to replace missing or damaged tissues, possibly curing now-incurable diseases. Initial targets include diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease and degenerative neurological diseases such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Party lines grow moot

Stem cells typically are taken from days-old human embryos - often left over from in-vitro fertilization efforts - then are laboratory-grown into lines or colonies. In experiments, those cells have been grown into needed tissues and injected into mice that have Parkinson's disease or spinal-cord injuries.

Because the embryos are destroyed when the cells are extracted, some conservatives consider their use similar to abortion.

President Bush opposes expanding embryonic stem-cell research beyond a limited pool of stem-cell lines, but with this issue, party lines appear to be increasingly meaningless.

Several lawmakers who oppose abortion rights

"If President Reagan's death, as sad as that is, helped move this administration to the right position, it would mean a

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now are advocating embryonic stem-cell studies. Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, whose spokesman describes him as an "anti-abortion warrior," just introduced legislation that would legalize not only federally funded stem-cell research but also embryo cloning for such research.

The day before Reagan died June 5, 58 senators sent Bush a letter outlining the current limitations on science and asking him to "modify" his position on embryonic stem cells "so that it provides this area of research the greatest opportunity to lead to the treatments and cures for which we are all hoping."

The letter, released two days after Reagan's death, was the latest signal that Congress increasingly seems willing to challenge Bush on the issue.

At the same time, patient advocacy groups stepped up their lobbying. Foundations for Parkinson's disease and juvenile diabetes last week had families call the White House, logging their support for embryonic stem-cell research. More than 300 Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation delegates lobbied lawmakers on the issue Thursday in Washington.

"I really think Nancy Reagan's support really helped us with the (Senate) letter," said DeGette, a Denver Democrat and one of two House members who for the past few years have led the stem-cell crusade. "I think it's helping to keep the debate in the forefront."

Benefits, science disputed

Opponents of embryonic stem-cell research say the promises being touted are exaggerated and not based in science.

In particular, there is dispute among scientists about whether stem cells could benefit Alzheimer's patients, said Douglas Johnson, legislative director with the National Right to Life Committee.

And talk of conducting the research in Reagan's honor goes against what he would have wanted, Johnson said. In 1988, Reagan issued a proclamation declaring "unalienable personhood ... from the moment of conception until natural death."

"Anyone would be hard-pressed to conclude he

would disagree with President Bush's position on killing embryos," Johnson said.

Allowing human embryos to be used for any research sets a frightening precedent, he said, in which one life becomes disposable for the purpose of saving another.

But some scientists say opening up more stem-cell lines to research, and creating an environment where researchers are encouraged to pursue stem-cell work, could lead to major advances. The University of Colorado Health Sciences Center does stem-cell research.

"The progress in this area has really been severely hampered by the current federal policy," said R. Timothy Mulcahy, associate vice chancellor for research policy at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, one of the nation's pre-eminent stem-cell research facilities.

"Most of the research in this area could potentially come from the universities," Mulcahy said. "The single largest source of funding at universities is federal support."

Claims that stem-cell research could potentially cure many diseases "are legitimate," Mulcahy said.

"Realistically, it will work in a lot of cases, but it will take years and years and years of research to do it," he said. "That is why federal support in this area is so vital."

Bush won't budge

Three years ago, Bush said 78 stem-cell lines in existence at the time could be used for federally funded research but that no new ones could be opened. However, those fighting for the research say only 19 of those lines are available to researchers, and many of those are contaminated with mouse cells.

Senators who signed the letter say there are 400,000 frozen embryos created through in-vitro fertilization that will be destroyed if they are not used.

Johnson, with the National Right to Life Committee, said that number is erroneous, that only 11,000 frozen embryos have been released by their parents. There are programs in which people unable to have children "adopt" embryos that are then implanted, he said.

The White House says Bush is not altering his position.

"The president remains committed to exploring the promise of stem-cell research but continues to believe strongly that we should not cross a fundamental moral line by funding or encouraging the destruction of human embryos," Bush spokesman Jim Morrell said.

He noted that Laura Bush's father died of Alzheimer's disease but that the first lady believes "we need to balance the interest in science with moral and ethical issues."

Republicans such as John McCain of Arizona, Trent Lott of Mississippi, Ted Stevens of Alaska and Gordon Smith of Oregon - nephew of Morris Udall and cousin of Mark Udall - signed the letter to Bush.

Campbell, a Republican from Ignacio, also signed. His spokeswoman said it was "a very personal decision" because Campbell's father suffered from Alzheimer's disease.

Other lawmakers who say they are abortion foes, including Californians Randy "Duke" Cunningham and Dana Rohrabacher, support embryonic stem-cell research. Cunningham took that position after a young woman with a rare, terminal disease pleaded with him that he could help save her life.

Colorado's other Republican senator, Wayne Allard, did not sign the letter.

The Senate letter comes less than two months after a similar letter co-authored by DeGette and signed by 206 House members was sent to Bush. A majority in the House is 218 votes.

DeGette said there are others who in recent days have told her they would support legislation promoting the research.

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