

After stem cell rules, senators urge Bush: Fifty-seven say Bush's policy no longer adequate

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Fifty-eight senators have asked President Bush to ease restrictions on stem cell research, with some noting that the late President Ronald Reagan's Alzheimer's disease could have been aided by expanded research.

In a letter to Bush, 42 Democrats, one independent and 15 Republican senators said the president's policy adopted in 2001 is no longer adequate. A similar letter was sent in May by 206 House members.

The 2001 White House policy allowed research on 78 existing lines, or colonies, of stem cells, but banned the creation of new lines. Some scientists believe that stem cells—which can grow into almost any human tissue—hold treatments or cures for a host of debilitating diseases.

The senators, in their June 4 letter, said only 19 of the 78 colonies are still available to researchers. In addition, some of those colonies may no longer be viable because they have been “contaminated” with mouse cells. “We would very much like to work with you to modify the current embryonic stem cell policy so that it provides this area of research the greatest opportunity to lead to the treatments and cures for which we are all hoping,” said the letter, whose signers included Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry.

Opponents, including Catholic bishops and most evangelical Protestant groups, say the procedure is tantamount to abortion because it involves destroying a potential human life for research. Several of the letter's signers, including Senator Orin Hatch (R., Utah) and Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R., Tex.), oppose most abortions but support expanded stem cell research.

“This issue is especially poignant given President Reagan’s passing,” said Senator Dianne Feinstein (D., Calif.), who helped draft the letter. “Embryonic stem cell research might hold the key to a cure for Alzheimer’s and other terrible diseases.” Nancy Reagan has herself become an outspoken advocate of such research.

Feinstein and others have sponsored a bill that would ban human cloning but allow federally funded stem cell research on the estimated 400,000 embryos created for in vitro fertilization that would otherwise be destroyed or go unused.

White House spokesman Ken Lisaius told the Associated Press that Bush “continues to believe strongly that we should not cross a fundamental moral line by funding or encouraging the destruction of human embryos.” *-Religion News Service*