



# THE SWAMP

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## **Boosting stem cell research, without the embryo**

*by David Lerman*

Virginia Rep. J. Randy Forbes stepped into the cultural war over stem cell research on Thursday, offering legislation aimed at boosting research that does not involve the destruction of human embryos.

Forbes, a conservative Republican from Chesapeake, joined Democratic Rep. Dan Lipinski of Illinois in introducing a bipartisan bill that they said would build a case for greater use of adult stem cells.

The measure would require the Department of Health and Human Services to begin "prioritizing research with the greatest potential for near-term clinical benefit in human patients." And such an effort, they said, would mean greater research funding using adult stem cells instead of those derived from human embryos.

President Bush has blocked federal funding for most embryonic stem cell research, saying he could not sanction the destruction of embryos for scientific research. Research on some existing stem cell lines was allowed to proceed.

Forbes, whose father died of Parkinson's disease, and Lipinski, who suffers from diabetes, said a renewed focus on adult stem cells offers the best chance of brokering a political middle ground in the stem cell wars.

"The debate became a rather divisive debate, dividing people rather than pulling people together," Forbes said. "Suppose we said, What can we do to help their lives the most?"

At a news conference held to showcase the benefits of adult stem cell research, lawmakers presented patients such as Doug Rice, who suffered from congestive heart disease and diabetes. Rice said he underwent an experimental procedure in Thailand in which adult stem cells from his blood were implanted into his coronary artery.

"I feel fantastic," Rice told reporters. "There's a treatment that works, but I had to go to Thailand to do it."

Forbes said U.S. research funding should be better targeted to treatments that show the most promise in curing patients. So far, he said, the evidence suggests adult stem cell research trumps embryonic stem cell research.

But it's not clear how much the legislation would change current research funding patterns or policies. The National Institutes of Health already spend far more on adult stem cell research than they spend on embryonic cell research.

This year, the NIH estimates it will spend \$37 million on human embryonic stem cell research, compared to \$206 million for human non-embryonic research, the agency's budget figures show.

Since 2001, the NIH invested \$130 million in human embryonic stem cells, compared to more than \$1.1 billion on non-embryonic stem cells, said Story Landis, director of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, in congressional testimony earlier this year.

Forbes's bill does not provide any additional funding.

Supporters of embryonic stem cell research say that adult stem cells can be useful, but that embryonic cells hold greater long-term promise because of their versatility.

“I am pro-research, pro-science and support all forms of stem cell research,” said actor Michael J. Fox, a leading advocate for embryonic stem cell research, in a letter to Congress this year. “Every scientist I’ve spoken to (and a lot more I haven’t) believes that embryonic stem cells may hold the key to better treatments and cures—not only for Parkinson’s disease but for cancer, diabetes, spinal cord injuries, heart disease, Alzheimer’s and countless other illnesses that cut short or diminish millions of lives every year.”

Forbes counters that such claims need to be examined to ensure that federal money is used for the maximum short-term benefit to patients.

“Show me the evidence,” Forbes said. As for the benefits of embryonic stem cell research, he said, “They can’t bring in a single case to show that.”

A similar bill, sponsored by Sen. Norm Coleman (R-Minn.) is pending in the Senate. Forbes said he does not know if his measure will get a hearing this year.

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