

Democrats seize on stem-cell issue Candidates say stance resonates

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By Susan Milligan and Rick Klein, Globe Staff | October 26, 2006

BELLEVUE, Wash. -- In a scramble to expand the congressional playing field, Democrats are seizing on embryonic stem-cell research as a "wedge issue" that registers with independent voters in suburban districts.

The issue widened into a national controversy yesterday, after conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh suggested Tuesday that actor Michael J. Fox was exaggerating the symptoms of his Parkinson's disease in advertisements he filmed for Democratic candidates. That suggestion drew swift repudiations from across the political spectrum, and Limbaugh apologized on the air "if this was not an act."

Democrats say the issue is resonating in recent days, with Fox's ads and a series of public events held by Democratic candidates highlighting the fact that President Bush's first and only veto of his presidency limited funding of embryonic stem-cell research.

At the Seattle-area Sunrise Senior Living of Bellevue yesterday, Democratic House candidate Darcy Burner held a roundtable discussion with researchers and activists who have family members suffering from diseases for which stem-cell research holds promise.

At Burner's side was Representative Diana DeGette, a Colorado Democrat who has traveled to 12 districts around the country to help candidates demonstrate the promise of stem-cell research.

"This affects so many Americans with so many diseases," said DeGette, who has sent \$100,000 from her political action committee to candidates who support expanded stem-cell research. "The American citizenry is more keyed in to what embryonic stem-cell research is."

Democrats are running stem-cell related advertisements in Maryland, Wisconsin, and Iowa. In Missouri, where a stem-cell measure is on the state ballot, some analysts believe the issue could decide the dead-heat Senate race between Republican Senator Jim Talent and Democrat Claire McCaskill.

While stem-cell research isn't a top-tier issue nationwide, Democrats in many districts are emphasizing it because it represents relatively safe territory to discuss "values" issues, said Linda Fowler, a government professor at Dartmouth College. Polls show strong majorities support expanded stem-cell research, despite the concerns of Bush and social conservatives that such research involves the destruction of human embryos.

"It brings in larger dimensions in a less inflammatory way than some other culture and moral issues," she said.

In Washington state, Burner is blasting incumbent Representative Dave Reichert for switching positions on the stem-cell issue. Reichert last year voted against DeGette's bill that would have lifted the federal ban on funding such research but then voted to override the president's veto of that same bill.

Reichert said after the override vote that conversations he had with female staff members helped persuade him to support the research. Burner yesterday called it a "politically expedient" reversal.

"My opponent doesn't believe in science, as far as we can tell," she said. "Instead of listening to scientists, he has to go have a cry-in with his staff before he makes decisions that are critical to the American people."

Reichert's campaign responded by saying that Burner is trying to make an issue out of something upon which the candidates agree. Reichert cast the initial vote against stem-cell research just a few months after getting to Congress, and he did his own examination of the subject before switching his vote this year, said Kimberly Cadena, a campaign spokeswoman.

"It was a very arduous decision-making process for him, and the weight of the scientific evidence weighed heavily," Cadena said.

Opponents of embryonic stem-cell research find themselves mostly on defense this year. And they say their opposition is being misconstrued: Virtually everyone supports stem-cell research, but many social conservatives oppose creating new stem-cell lines because they destroy embryos.

Wendy Wright, president of the conservative group Concerned Women for America, said the assertions by proponents of embryonic stem-cell research are "over the top," and fail to account for advances made through research on adult stem cells, which do not require destruction of embryos. She said she hopes the ads featuring Fox will reopen the debate and give opponents of embryonic stem-cell research a chance to explain themselves.

"I find it absolutely reprehensible that they would be misleading patients and their relatives in this way," Wright said. "They're giving a lot of hype, suggesting that the only hope that people with various disabilities and diseases have is stem-cell research."

In Missouri, opponents of the ballot measure aimed at boosting stem-cell research have enlisted actor James Caviezel, who portrayed Jesus in "The Passion of the Christ," as well as several pro athletes in an ad campaign of their own. The athletes include Jeff Suppan, a former Red Sox player who now pitches for the St. Louis Cardinals.

Yet as public education around stem cells has advanced, public support for research has grown. Celebrity support from Fox, the late actor Christopher Reeve, and Nancy Reagan has brought the public around on the notion that embryonic stem-cell research is vital, DeGette said.

Most scientists say embryonic stem cells hold by far the most hope in developing treatments for many debilitating diseases and injuries, since they can be fashioned into any type of cell in the human body. The president's policy of banning funding for all but a few lines of embryonic stem cells is hurting the nation's scientific progress, said Charles E. Murry, co-director of the University of Washington's Institute for Stem Cell and Regenerative Medicine.

"It's like working with a software program that's five years old," Murry said.

And, proponents argue, the impact is real. At the roundtable in Bellevue, Bruce Hanson, a 51-year-old software engineer who suffered a spinal injury in a skiing accident six years ago, told the participants that he hopes to regain full use of his hands through therapies derived from embryonic stem cells.

"People are playing politics with my body," Hanson said. "If you want to talk about sin, that to me is sin." ■

