

## **Expert: U.S. lags in stem cell research**

By W. DALE NELSON

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LARAMIE -- Regardless of who is elected president in November, it will take several years for the United States to catch up with other countries in stem cell research, a leading authority in the field said Tuesday in Laramie.

"There is a feeling we have got to do something rapidly or we are going to be really out of the ball game," John Hopkins Medical School Professor John D. Gearhart declared in a public address at the University of Wyoming.

But whether the voters' choice is President Bush or Sen. John Kerry, Gearhart said, "it will still be at least a few years, let alone several years, before the kind of mechanisms can be put in place" to proceed with the needed research.

He said scientists are stymied by the Republican president's decision to limit federally funded research to existing lines of stem cells, which Kerry and other Democrats criticized, and by an earlier congressional enactment restricting use of such money.

He said questions are also raised by scholars "who are fearful of where biotechnology is taking us" and see a danger of "losing our human dignity."

"There is just an overall feeling that once we start mucking with this, that things are going down the tube," he said.

However, he added, "The kinds of things we are doing are enabling. We're trying to do it for good, to help people. How shall we decide what can and should be done? It is obviously a difficult issue. Somehow, in our society, we have to get a legislative statement of what should be permitted in this controversial area."

Gearhart said the United Kingdom has achieved this, but the United States has not, although "scientists are doing their job in keeping legislators abreast of possibilities."

He said there are 22 stem cell lines now available to federally funded researchers, of which half a dozen have been used and the others "aren't worth anything at all."

Growing numbers of countries, he said, are "putting hundreds of millions, and in the case of China, billions of dollars into embryonic stem cell research."

Gearhart said private investment in the area in the United States is being directed to investigators in Singapore, Australia and Israel "because of the

fear of what critical change is coming."

"No matter what kind of stem cell research you are talking about, we have a lot of work to do," he said. "Despite the politicians who are interested in two years, four years or six years to get something done, it's going to take a while."

He said research so far has put scientists in a position to "very quickly move to some of the safety issues" that must be resolved.

Asked how he sees the field of stem cell research faring 40 years from now, Gearhart said, "I think we would, in sufficient time, have a variety of alternatives for therapy, some of them derived from the stem cell population itself, others from the knowledge. I think we are going to have a wonderful number of options."

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