

UM hoping new administration opens stem-cell doors

By ZACHARY S. FAGENSON

President Obama's promise to lift predecessor President Bush's limits on federal funding for embryonic-stem-cell research could have a profound effect on the work being done at the University of Miami.

The university's Interdisciplinary Stem Cell Institute has been doing research on stem cells since its founding by Dr. Joshua Hare in January 2007.

Days after the inauguration in which the new president proclaimed a renewed support for the sciences, Dr. Hare said he is looking forward to a time when biomedical research in general is aggressively supported by the federal government.

Citing moral concerns over destruction of embryonic cells obtained through the abortion process, President Bush in 2001 barred the National Institute of Health from funding research on embryonic stem cells other than using the 60 known cell lines that existed when he signed the executive order.

"The biggest problem the stem-cell

[research] has is that if your laboratory is working on adult and embryonic stem cells, you have to maintain an incredible barrier between the funding of the two," he said. "What I'm hoping is for a general increase in funding for all stem-cell research."

From 1998 to 2004, the National Institute of Health's budget increased from \$13.7 billion to \$28 billion. Since 2004, that figure has hovered between \$28 billion and \$29 billion.

And in a field that is constantly becoming more complex, a flat budget usually means less money to go around.

"Keeping a constant budget essentially means a [funding] reduction for new sciences," he said.

While not one of the most widely recognized economic engines, Dr. Hare touted the sector as a place with potential for job growth.

"Biomedical research and technology is one of the greatest strengths of the economy," he said. "[We] talk about shovel-ready products, but giving a grant to a university is a huge economic stimulus."

When the National Institute of Health funds grants, universities hire more people and retain better faculty who in turn hire technicians and support staff."

Although there's been little public discussion of research grants as a path toward economic recovery, Dr. Hare said the medical community should be doing more in general to generate support for an increase in funding from an administration many perceive to be more supportive of the sciences.

He was, however, unaware of any serious lobbying efforts.

"I don't think we're doing enough," he said in regards to the medical community's voice on Capitol Hill. "[Medical] societies should be presenting this in a positive way as an economic stimulus."

While he said lifting restrictions on embryonic-stem-cell research wouldn't immediately allow doctors to treat those with incurable diseases and conditions, he was hopeful that new ideas in the White House would foster a research community of continuous scientific breakthroughs.



Photo courtesy of Miller School of Medicine

UM's Dr. Joshua Hare founded the school's interdisciplinary Stem Cell Institute in 2007.