US Senate leader gives support to expanded stem cell research

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

In a surprising move the leader of the Republican Senate majority, Bill Frist, broke with President Bush last week and said he would support federal funding for research using stem cells from leftover embryos donated by couples who had completed their infertility treatment.

The president had limited federal funds to stem cell lines in existence on 9 August 2001. However, Dr Frist noted, only 22 lines are now available, and they are becoming less stable and may all be contaminated (*BMJ* 2005;330:1285).

Since federal money was not available several states have provided funds for stem cell research. Voters in California approved a \$3bn (£1.7bn; €2.5bn) bond issue to support such research.

In May the House of Representatives passed a bill that would provide funding for research using donated embryos. President Bush said he would veto the bill if the Senate passed it.

Dr Frist, who is a transplant surgeon, said in his Senate speech, "I strongly believe—as do countless other scientists, clinicians, and doctors—that embryonic stem cells uniquely hold specific promise for some therapies and potential cures that adult stem cells cannot provide... I believe that human life begins at conception... It isn't just a matter of faith, it's a fact of science." Nevertheless, he said that embryonic stem cell research should advance with dignity and respect for human life.

The president's press secretary, Scott McClellan, said Dr Frist had told the president of his decision before making his speech and that the president had replied, "You've got to vote [according to] your conscience."

In an editorial the *Washington Post* (July 30; sect A: 18) said, "In

the face of evidence that the existing rules are impeding valuable research, this [permitting research on more stem cell lines] is the only sensible conclusion—one that ought to make the president reconsider his veto threat."

Dr Frist said the Senate would debate the bill passed by the House of Representatives when it returns from recess in September. Six other bills dealing with stem cell research may be debated as well.

He also laid down five principles for federal funding for stem cell research—that the embryos

were created for fertility treatment, are no longer needed by the couple, would otherwise be discarded and destroyed, and are donated for research with the written informed consent of the couple and that the couple should receive no financial or other incentives.

Dr Frist's decision was praised by one of the bill's Senate sponsors, Arlen Specter (Republican, Pennsylvania), as well as by scientists, organisations for people with Alzheimer's disease, juvenile diabetes, Parkinson's disease, and

spinal cord injuries, by moderate Republicans, and by Nancy Reagan, widow of the former Republican president Ronald Reagan, who died of Alzheimer's disease.

But conservative Christian groups criticised Dr Frist's decision. Among them, Focus on the Family called it "an unwise and unnecessary choice both for public policy and for respecting the dignity of human life." The president of the Catholic League called him "Dr Duplicity." The National Clergy Council also denounced him. □

Mumbai braces itself for leptospirosis and waterborne infections

Fears of leptospirosis and waterborne infections intensified in Mumbai after unprecedented monsoon rains last week killed nearly 400 people in the city, choked water and sewage systems, and left hundreds of animal carcasses on the streets. Health officials have asked the public to drink boiled water, avoid consuming fresh fruit and salads, and consult doctors even for minor illnesses.

Thousands of people trudged for hours through knee deep water after rains paralysed traffic, and doctors are worried about the risk of leptospirosis, a bacterial infection acquired through contact with the excreta of infected rodents.

"Leptospirosis has displayed a seasonal post-monsoon pattern in Mumbai in recent years, and we're asking people with cuts or bruises while in the water to consult doctors," said Murar Yeolekar, professor of medicine at Mumbai's Sion Hospital. "Given the incubation period, we might see a spurt in leptospirosis from the week beginning 6 August," he said.

Public hospitals have stocked themselves with antibiotics, and municipal authorities have increased the chlorine concentration in water from 0.3 ppm to 0.5 ppm. The first priority was to remove the animal carcasses and piled-up garbage, said a city health officer, Jayant Telang. The 944 mm of rainfall in 24 hours was the heaviest downpour recorded in decades and caused parts of Mumbai to be flooded with more than a metre of water. Most of the deaths were caused by landslides, structural collapses, and electrocution rather than drowning.

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