

Heed Nancy Reagan's call for more stem cell research



DR. HOWARD FEDEROFF

GUEST
ESSAYIST

Whenever a celebrity or public figure is ill, public awareness of the illness rises — which is why awareness of Alzheimer's, the disease that robbed President Ronald Reagan of what were to be his and Nancy's golden years, is higher than ever.

We respect President Reagan for disclosing his Alzheimer's disease in a 1994 letter to the American public, a brave step to help alleviate the stigma that often accompanies this disease. Perhaps even more courageous was Nancy Reagan's public statement a few weeks ago calling for a renewed effort in Alzheimer's research, an effort that she said should include stem cell research. This stance is directly opposite her husband's position in the 1980s.

Stem cells are able to generate (or differentiate) themselves into many different types of healthy tissue; they hold great potential for therapy in spinal cord injury, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, diabetes, cancer and other diseases. They can be derived from unused embryos, formed by the union of sperm and egg in a glass dish, stored at labs and clinics.

During his time in office, President Reagan did not allow federal funding of any research using fetal tissue. Under President George H.W. Bush, the ban remained. President Clinton loosened it but couldn't come up with the funding; in 1995 Congress voted to prohibit funding of such research.

President George W. Bush altered this ban with a confounding concession: The federal government would fund stem cell research, but only on a limited number of stem cell lines harvested prior to his August 2001 announcement. U.S. scientists and physicians complained that they were left to



L.A. Times Syndicate

fight this and other diseases with one hand tied behind their back.

A multifaceted attack on Alzheimer's disease includes research into its cause, treatment, cure and prevention, and there is no single pathway to these ends. At the University of Rochester, recent Alzheimer's research involves several different approaches.

For example, clinical studies led to the approval of a newer drug, memantine, that improves patients' symptoms significantly when combined with an older medication, donepezil.

A second Rochester study, known as ADAPT, is evaluating the effectiveness of the newer anti-inflammatory medications in preventing Alzheimer's. Rochester is one of just six sites in the nation taking part in this approach.

Our physicians and scientists are working on a vaccine to prevent or treat the disease; they're devising new ways to diagnose it more quickly; and they're at the forefront of discovering how a person's genes might make him or her more vulnerable to the disease. Our neurobiologists are making landmark progress with progenitor cells, taken from adult brain cells, in an effort

You can help

The University of Rochester Medical Center needs volunteers for a study to evaluate the effectiveness of anti-inflammatory medications in actually preventing Alzheimer's disease. Healthy people over 70 may volunteer by calling (585) 760-6574 or toll-free (866) 278-6723.

to find better treatment for a number of nervous system diseases.

But in Rochester and across the nation, more could be done with stem cells. The controversy is that stem cells are taken from embryos. Some people believe that these embryos have one purpose only — the creation of life — and that their use for the purposes of therapy is immoral. Others see these unused embryos as a life-affirming vital resource for treating diseases.

Exploring this issue is the Council on Bioethics, created by President Bush when he announced his restrictions. Our hope is that this council heeds Nancy Reagan, who watched President Reagan's mental capabilities deteriorate over 10 years and can testify to just how devastating this disease can be.

Stem cell research is a major highway for future treatment and possible cure. For us to make the most of it, researchers need a healthy dose of large and predictable funding.

Further, we would welcome sound regulations to ensure high ethical standards and practices. Perhaps President Bush, an admirer of the Reagans, will see the wisdom in this approach.

The Reagans and millions of patients and families have paid dearly in their struggles with Alzheimer's, both in financial and human terms. In comparison, the funding of stem cell research is a relatively small cost, but a big investment. It's the right and ethical thing to do for those living and dying with this terrible disease. □

Federoff is senior associate dean for basic research, University of Rochester Medical Center.