

Stem cell research has local support, foes

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After years of pushing stem cell research legislation, Mary Schneider of Batavia is beginning to feel her work has paid off.

President Barack Obama said Monday he is allowing federal taxpayer dollars to fund significantly broader research on embryonic stem cells, reversing a major George W. Bush policy.

In 2001, Bush ordered a ban on federal funding for research into any new lines of embryonic stem cells.

Schneider, 47, who ran against Rep. Kay Hatcher, R-Yorkville, for the Illinois House 50th District seat last fall, became an advocate for stem cell research after her son's cerebral palsy condition improved through the use of his own umbilical cord blood stem cells, which Schneider saved in a cord blood bank.

Ryan, who was 2 years old when diagnosed, could not move around without feeling immense pain. His walking, talking and eating were also severely limited.

Ryan sought treatment at Duke University for the rare stem cell procedure—and today, at age 5, he walks, talks and eats normally.

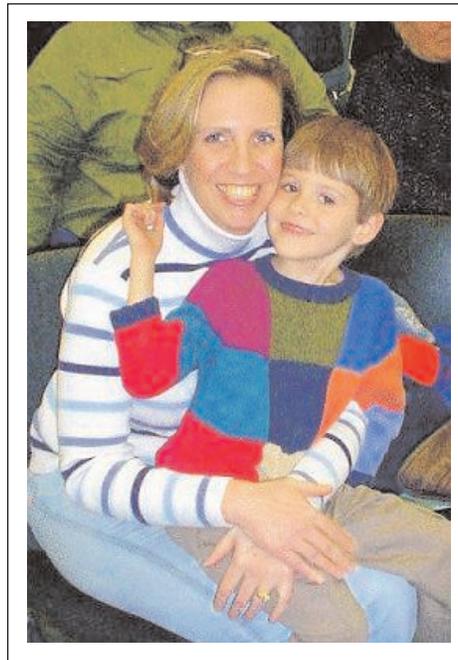
Schneider has since helped families across the nation access the same type of care.

“My son was so lucky. He was fortunate, but it's a very small portion of society who are eligible for it. Treatment should be available to anyone who needs it,” Schneider said.

‘Early stage’

Supporters of Obama's decision, like Schneider, say such embryonic stem cell research could uncover cures for serious ailments from diabetes to paralysis.

Embryos created through in vitro fertilization usually carry six to eight cells. Researchers hope to use those cells to develop tissues to override or cure unhealthy tissues, potentially for many conditions and ailments, said **Dr. Tarun Jain** of Chicago IVF, a fertility clinic with a site in St. Charles.



Mary Schneider and her son Ryan in 2008

“We're at a fairly early stage to this type of research, which has been halted for the past eight years,” **Jain** said.

Those against it, however, say there are other forms of stem cell research that are working, such as adult and umbilical cord research.

“As a pro-life organization, we've always opposed the destruction of life in its early stages, whether that takes place in an abortion facility or in a laboratory. Life in its early stage deserves to be respected and protected,” anti-abortion activist Eric Scheidler said.

“If a human life is not destroyed, then this kind of research is wonderful,” said Scheidler, who is also the spokesman of the Pro-Life Action League based in Chicago.

Fertility clinics

Chicago IVF, which performs about 350 in vitro fertilization procedures yearly through its six offices, has already received a few calls from current couples going through in vitro fertilization at their clinics

about how they can donate their frozen embryos to such research.

But it will take at least a month for fertility clinics to understand their new role under Obama's announcement.

Jain foresees that the option will go over well for infertile couples, who have the option to discard, freeze or donate their embryos.

Jain published a study last year on the preferences of infertile couples in the Chicago area, including the Fox Valley. More than 60 percent of surveyed couples said they would “strongly consider” donating their embryos to stem cell research, **Jain** said.

Another physician, Dr. Randy Morris of IVF1 in Naperville, said embryonic stem cell research opens doors to other types of research that could aid infertile couples.

Women in their mid-40s with poor ovarian function, for example, could potentially create their own new eggs through a blood draw. The stem cells from that blood could then be isolated to create new eggs, Morris said.

“Instead of being relegated to the use of eggs in her ovaries for 46 years, you may be able to get very young eggs of a very young person,” he said.

Little research in Valley

Stem cell advocate Schneider said the discussions in support of stem cell research are not happening often in the Fox Valley. Those who advocate such procedures or are trying to find more resources for such information usually end up seeking out the options on their own, just as she did, she said.

Rush-Copley Medical Center does not participate in any stem cell research or procedures at this time.

Provena Mercy Medical Center in Aurora, founded as a Catholic healthcare ministry, has had no involvement with any procedures and is confident that its operations won't change under the president's latest announcement, a spokeswoman said.