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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“Democratic Women's Checklist for Change: Stem Cell Research”

Mrs. FEINSTEIN. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Arkansas for her remarks. I don't think anyone speaks more eloquently about the needs of American families than Blanche Lincoln does. It is always real and it is always practical. I am just delighted to be a colleague of hers.

I rise today to say why stem cell research should be part of this Democratic Women's Checklist for Change. The reason is very simple, and that is because stem cell research offers the promise of historic advances in the treatment of catastrophic disease. It is that simple.

The potential for this research was in the news again last week, as scientists at Johns Hopkins announced that they used embryonic stem cells to regenerate damaged nerves in paralyzed rats. That is something that no one ever thought could be done. After being treated with cells harvested from mouse embryos, most of the rats regained enough strength to walk and bear weight on their previously paralyzed hind legs.

Just imagine what this discovery could one day mean for patients with spinal cord injuries, multiple sclerosis or ALS. It could be revolutionary because one thing science believed was that the spinal cord, once severed, could never be regenerated. Now, for the first time in history, we see there may be a solution to that and it rests with stem cell research.

Translating this discovery into treatment of human patients will likely take several years, and it will likely not see fruition without Federal research dollars. Here is the rub. Our researchers face a major roadblock imposed by the President in August of 2001, when he limited Federal funding to 22 lines of stem cells. All of these available lines are now contaminated with mouse feeder cells, so virtually there is no Federal ongoing research.

Thirteen months ago, the House approved a bipartisan bill by Mr. Castle and Mrs. DeGette, a bill that would remove this roadblock. It would permit promising

research to go forward. It would offer new hope to millions of Americans suffering from disability, diseases, and spinal cord injuries. The Castle-DeGette bill essentially says that it would be possible to use embryos that are rejected in IVF clinics; that is, in vitro fertilization clinics. All of us know that tens of thousands, if not millions, of these embryos are rejected and they are destroyed. Those embryos could be taken to form new stem cell lines under this bill.

The votes are here to pass this bill today, but the President has vowed a veto, and the Republican leadership refuses to bring it to the floor. In the year that we have waited for Senate action, millions more are now waiting for cures that one day could come from stem cell research. In the last year, consider this: 1.4 million Americans were diagnosed with cancer; 60,000 Americans were diagnosed with Parkinson's disease; 11,000 Americans suffered spinal cord injuries; and 1.5 million adults were diagnosed with diabetes.

These are just new diagnoses. Think of all the Americans who continue to suffer cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, spinal cord injuries, and catastrophic diseases which could potentially be helped by embryonic stem cell research.

The administration's policies have left our researchers far behind the rest of the world. In fact, other countries are, today, laying the foundation for groundbreaking cures, while U.S. scientists are not able to gain Federal funding for research.

Evidence that the United States is no longer the world leader in embryonic stem cell research is mounting. Scientists around the world have created 128 new embryonic stem cell lines since President Bush announced his policy. Only 34 of these new lines were created in our country. The proportion of embryonic stem cell papers published by U.S. research groups has fallen dramatically in the past 2 years.

At least 10 other nations - Germany, Finland, France, Sweden, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Singapore, Israel, China, Australia -- are investing substantial sums of government money in embryonic stem cell research. That is totaling hundreds of millions of dollars. Other nations are constructing facilities, they are attracting our American researchers who should be here at home doing this research, and they are learning more every day.

The United States, on the other hand, remains at the starting line. I don't think we can afford to watch other nations move ahead. Eight years ago, I introduced one of the first bills addressing stem cell research, so we have waited this long -- 8 years -- for action. Time and time again, we have pressed for action on the floor of the Senate. We pressed for it privately. We pressed for it by letter. We pressed for it by press conference with groups of sufferers of catastrophic diseases. All of this has been to no avail. I can't believe it. I can't believe this kind of recalcitrance. And all of this is despite the fact that every poll shows a dominant majority of Americans support stem cell research.

It is time the Senate place the health of Americans ahead of the views of a limited number of people whose views are apart from the mainstream of America. We owe it to the 110 million Americans suffering daily from debilitating and catastrophic disease. Every day that we wait, more people develop diseases that could one day be cured. Every day we wait, other nations move further ahead.

I urge the Republican leadership to bring the Castle-DeGette stem cell bill to the floor and allow Federal research to move forward. A Democratic Senate would listen to the American people. A Democratic Senate would make the promotion of this promising research a reality. This Senate is in Republican control. The Republican-controlled House

has passed this bill. A dominant majority of the American people say enact this bill. Yet this Senate, Republican controlled, becomes the roadblock.

I urge the Republican leadership to reconsider and bring the Castle-DeGette bill to the floor of the Senate for a vote.

Mr. President, I would like to present my colleague, the distinguished Senator from the great State that harbors the great city of New Orleans, LA. She will speak about making Americans upwardly economically mobile in the American workplace.