

Hot Off The Hill Mary Bono on Health Care

Stem Cell Research



Congresswoman Mary Bono Recently named to the Health Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Congresswoman Mary Bono updated Healthy Living magazine on critical health care issues facing the nation.

Stem cell research is a very controversial and hot topic right now with passionate beliefs influencing both sides of the debate. I am sympathetic to both arguments and after much careful consideration, I have come to support the research for the amazing potential that stem cells hold in treating and possibly curing a number of diseases and forms of cellular damage. Last month, the United States House of Representatives voted to support The Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act, and I was proud to be one of the original Republican co-sponsors of this legislation. Although I don't like passing something that I know the President said he would veto, I strongly believe in the science of stem cell research. Whether or not there truly are answers out there on embryonic stem cell research I don't know, but I do know that unless we try, we will never know those answers. The United States has long been the leader in technology and biotechnology, and to give up that first place rank would be a mistake.

Often the debate on embryonic stem cell research becomes a pro-life or pro-choice argument, but this logic is shortsighted. An embryo is really 250 cells called a "blastocyst." In in-vitro fertilization clinics, the remaining cells that were unable to be used for fertilization will be discarded anyway, so the debate is more one of organ donation. Part of the pending legislation defines that the stem cells meet certain ethical requirements. For example, the stem cells must have been specifically designated, in writing, to be discarded to be eligible for donation. Only with the expressed consent of the donor can the cells that would have otherwise been discarded be donated for research (there is a strict prohibition on any monetary compensation). In California, people overwhelmingly support stem cell research with the passage of Proposition 71, and I support the idea that the United States get involved as well. Therapeutic cloning

Recently, South Korea had a big breakthrough with a form of embryonic stem cell research called therapeutic cloning. Unfortunately, the word "cloning," still has connotations of "science fiction" and that becomes very scary to many people. The President has even said that he is very worried about a world that accepts "cloning."

"Therapeutic cloning," however, is actually the egg only (no sperm is involved). The DNA is removed from the egg, and somebody else's DNA, most likely with the condition researchers are looking to study is injected. Stem cells lines are then grown from there. This process is commonly referred to as "cloning." Although it is how cloning begins, it does not mean it is cloning. These eggs are used to derive stem cell lines for research and are not implanted.

If you are producing stem cells, the bioethics are very, very tough. I am in support of the research, and I believe that by establishing national guidelines, we can help move this research forward while ensuring that it is performed in an ethically sound manner. Eisenhower Medical Center is perfectly positioned to be a center for how we get people well, keep people well... Cost of Health Care

No matter how you slice it or dice it, the overarching issue in health care is cost, and too often cost equals quality. Cost is a big umbrella that covers all forms of health care. I believe that our country can no longer support the rising costs of health care unless we shift our focus to preventative health care.

We need to start talking about Medicaid, for example, which is our country's health plan for the poor. We must start looking at prevention, rather than treating people once they're already sick. Our focus should be on keeping people healthy... that's the only way we're ever going to get on top of health care costs. We need to focus on how we get our population healthy. Obesity

I have worked a great deal on childhood obesity issues, and introduced the IMPACT legislation to provide funding to promote good nutrition and increased physical activity to reduce obesity. I have tried to find a federal role to combat the epidemic of obesity where 61 percent of America's adults and 13 percent of our children are overweight.

We know that if people are not healthy as children, then the later health costs to the public are going to be huge. To get the government to be proactive in any field, let alone health care, is monumental in itself, but we're starting to see some changes. Recently, I had dinner with Health and Human Services Secretary Mike LeVitt to discuss this issue. I hope that the mentality in Washington will start to change to focus on how to keep people healthy in the first place. It's all about wellness. Eisenhower Medical Center is perfectly positioned to be a center for how we get people well, keep people well, help people when they are well and assist with healthy living and prevention. With our growing population in the Valley, especially the senior population here, this is just where we need to be focused. Prescription Drugs

Beginning in November of this year, seniors can begin enrolling in the Medicare Part D program. This benefit, which goes into effect in January 2006, will help seniors save money on the cost of their drugs, with added savings for those with the greatest need: seniors with low-incomes, or high drug costs, or both. One-third of Medicare seniors, and half of all minority seniors, will qualify for substantial low-income subsidies. On average, Medicare will pay 97 percent of the drug costs for 6.4 million low-income seniors who are currently served by state Medicaid programs. HIV/AIDS

The Ryan White CARE Act is a five-year policy that is up for reauthorization this year, and I'm happy to be one of the lead sponsors on getting it reauthorized. The Ryan White CARE Act is this nation's most successful response to the AIDS epidemic and the largest federal program to fund the care and treatment of low-income and uninsured people living with HIV/AIDS. The Act supports programs essential to those in our community who are struggling with this deadly disease. The Act also protects our already strained public health system from collapse by reducing costly hospitalizations and emergency care. I'm a firm believer in this bill and know the tremendous support that it has given to our community. Nursing Shortage

Washington is very well aware of the issue, and I'm happy to direct some federal dollars to invest in a solution. It's a job issue for a lot of people. These are great jobs that somewhere along the way, people turned away from, and failed to realize that nursing is a great profession.

I sponsored the Nurse of Tomorrow Act to attract new students into nursing schools, retain existing nurses and provide incentives to nurses who have left the field to return to the nursing profession. We hope that this approach will begin to meet both short-term and long-term goals to bolster the nursing workforce and get nurses into under-served areas. The bottom line is that colleges here should get all the support possible from the community, and we ought to be putting great young men and women in these jobs.

More schools are needed, but also, again, we need to get young people excited about nursing. I had talked before about doing PSA's with celebrities saying nursing is a great profession. So, I think it's twofold. I think it is the need for schools, but I think it's also igniting young people's minds that it's a great profession to go into.