Policy & Practice

Stem Cell Dustup in Massachusetts

Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney (R) is sparring with Democratic state legislators over a possible ban on certain types of stem cell research now being conducted in the state.

In February, state senate president Robert Travaglini (D) introduced a bill to loosen restrictions on stem cell research; the measure allows for research involving "any human embryo whether formed by fertilization, somatic cell nuclear transfer, parthenogenesis, or other means."

In response, the governor said that while he had no problem with stem cell research involving discarded fertility clinic embryos, "the law should prohibit all human cloning and the creation of new human embryos for the purpose of research. …I believe that the practice of cloning human embryos for research or reproduction crosses the boundary of ethics."

Sen. Travaglini accused the governor of "raising fears and unfounded doubts" about the research. "We want to send the message that this kind of research is welcome in Massachusetts," said a spokeswoman for Sen. Travaglini.

Assault on Salt?

Federal withholding of data on which the government has based its recommendation to reduce salt intake with the goal of lowering stroke risk is drawing fire from the salt industry.

The Salt Institute, which represents the interests of salt manufacturers, sued the Department of Health and Human Services, claiming that the department refused to release the studies that support its 2002 recommendation that Americans cut down on their salt intake as a way to avoid hypertension and stroke.

The failure to release that information was a violation of the federal Information Quality Act, the suit alleges. Under the act, parties who feel that the government is withholding information have the right to appeal to the agency in question; the Salt Institute, along with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, did just that before the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, but the appeal was denied.

HHS says that the suit is not valid because there is no provision in the act for a judicial review of a denied appeal; the court agreed and dismissed the suit. The chamber and the institute have appealed.

HHS Budget Reviews Mixed

The president's 2006 budget request got mixed reviews from health care groups. While some groups objected to a lack of appropriate funding for health professions programs, others decried the $60 billion in proposed cuts to Medicaid over the next 10 years.

The Association of American Medical Colleges is opposed to cuts "that will further stretch the already taut health care safety net provided by teaching hospitals and medical school physicians," Jordan Cohen, AAMC president said in a statement.

While pleased with a $300 million boost for community health centers, Daniel Hawkins of the National Association of Community Health Centers noted that proposed cuts to Medicaid and the National Health Service Corps presented a funding conflict. Not everyone was unhappy with the budget: the AMA praised the budget's efforts to fund tax credit initiatives and expand health savings accounts. The request includes $1.55 billion for the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, a less than 1% increase from the institute's budget for fiscal year 2005.

The administration proposes to spend an additional $26 billion on the "Neuroscience Blueprint" project, a research collaboration involving 15 institutes within the National Institutes of Health.

Controversial Retiree Benefits Rule

AARP is rejoicing now that a federal judge has temporarily blocked a new rule from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) regarding retiree health benefits, but some members of Congress are not happy about this latest development.

The rule, which the commission approved last April, exempts employers from age discrimination laws when it comes to designing retiree health benefits. The EEOC says the rule is designed to allow employers to better coordinate retiree benefits with Medicare.

However, AARP says the rule simply makes it easier for employers to reduce health benefits for older retirees or abandon them altogether.

EEOC chair Cari Dominguez said that "any delay in implementing the rule endangers vital protections for retirees."

Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, issued a statement saying that "if the AARP is successful with its lawsuit, it will surely cause more workers to lose their retiree health coverage."

The judge's action prevents the rule from being implemented until early next month.

—Joyce Frieden