

OMAHA -- A top administrator at the University of Nebraska Medical Center said President Barack Obama's decision to lift restrictions on embryonic stem-cell research made Monday "a big day for science."

In the wake of Obama's decision, UNMC scientists will wait for the National Institutes of Health to develop new stem-cell research guidelines, then will push for federal funding, said David Crouse, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs.

"What does it mean for science? ... Things should move forward a lot more quickly," Crouse said after Obama reversed Bush-era restrictions that limited federally funded embryonic stem-cell research to cell lines created before Aug. 9, 2001.

Since 2001, Crouse said, about 400 cell lines have been created nationally without federal dollars. Those lines, he said, are "much more valuable" because they are higher quality and, unlike the older ones, are not contaminated.

UNMC scientists may now have a chance to work on the newer lines.

"Embryonic stem cells hold tremendous promise. The promise is undoubtedly some distance away," said Stephen Rennard, a professor of medicine who leads a stem-cell research team.

But, he said, "the research needs to be pursued."

Embryonic stem cells are "blank slates" that can grow into different kinds of tissue. Many scientists believe if they could control the cells, they could be used to develop treatments for diseases like Parkinson's, diabetes and more.

But harvesting the cells requires destruction of an embryo, which opponents find morally objectionable.

Opposition to Obama's decision was unanimous among Nebraska's congressional delegation.

On the Republican side, Sen. Mike Johanns said he was "deeply disappointed," Rep. Lee Terry called embryonic stem-cell research "inappropriate and immoral" and Rep. Jeff Fortenberry likened the move to "a bailout for unsuccessful scientific ventures."

Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson also said he disagreed with the Obama move.

In a statement, the Nebraska Coalition for Ethical Research said: "The Obama administration's decision to encourage destruction of human embryos is bad for stem-cell research. It urges institutions such as UNMC to go down the wrong road."

Opponents already have signaled they're ready for a renewed battle over embryonic stem-cell research. Friday, several pro-life advocates urged the NU Board of Regents to ensure the research isn't expanded at UNMC no matter what happens federally.

Opponents believe UNMC should focus instead on adult stem-cell research, a non-controversial practice some believe has proven more successful than embryonic stem-cell research.

Current regents policy says UNMC researchers must abide by federal guidelines in their work.

Even though embryonic stem-cell research opponents now hold a majority on the board, several regents have said they don't anticipate the board will revisit its policy.

And a change in regents policy isn't necessary, Crouse said, given a state law passed last year that prevents scientists from creating and destroying embryos at will.

Monday's decision gave new hope to Omahans who believe they could benefit from embryonic stem-cell research.

Monnie Lindsay, 53, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease 15 years ago.

The disease has cost her her career as a lawyer. It's meant four terrifying brain surgeries. It's emptied her wallet.

Embryonic stem-cell research, Lindsay said, offers hope for new treatments, therapies and even a cure.

"For all of that we're very excited," she said of other Parkinson's patients.

Rik Bonness, a father of two children, ages 23 and 20, with Type I diabetes, said Obama's decision is "very exciting for our family."

Recalling his family's struggles -- late-night blood sugar checks and countless visits to the doctor -- Bonness, a former Husker All-American football player, briefly lost his composure before a room full of reporters.

"Living with a chronic disease and its burdens requires that you have hope," he said. "This brings new hope."

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