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Doug Stone: Time For Senate To Act On Stem Cells

If Bush uses his first veto against research to save lives, let him try to explain himself.

A year ago, the U.S. House of Representatives provided a glimmer of hope to millions of families and their loved ones who suffer the ravages of Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, spinal cord injuries and diabetes.

The House, not known for its bipartisanship, came together to endorse an expansion of federal support for embryonic stem cell research, which scientists believe may lead to cures for these and other diseases.

But the bill still languishes in the Senate, with the threat of a presidential veto awaiting Senate action.

In a letter last month to Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, a supporter of the bill, former First Lady Nancy Reagan, wrote, "The wait for Senate action has been very difficult to comprehend...There is just no more time to wait."

My wife, Ann, has suffered from the complications of Type 1 (insulin-dependent) diabetes for 22 years. In the year since the House offered its ray of hope to suffering families, she has visited a half-dozen doctors numerous times, endured eye surgeries, ingested up to 20 pills a day and more. Despite all her medical problems, she is carrying on bravely with a transplanted kidney and pancreas. The congressional legislation will not undo the ravages of diabetes for her.

But it may help millions of other patients and families, particularly young victims of diabetes and

other illnesses. The stem cell bill would expand funding for stem cell lines created after President Bush in 2001 restricted funding of research to the 60 existing lines. As it turns out, there are only 22 lines available today, and the limited number is holding up research, according to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. And those lines are contaminated, making their use difficult.

Conscious of the ethical implications of this complicated research, the bill says stem cells must come from embryos no longer needed in the fertility process that would otherwise be discarded. The embryos must be donated by the couple involved without any financial inducement. Prominent scientists from around the country support the bill as do, according to polls, a majority of Americans.

In the absence of federal action, some states, notably California, have created their own funds for stem cell research. But federal support of stem cell research is critical, as it is in most scientific fields.

The Senate needs to consider the bill now. It has bipartisan support. It may save lives. It will bring hope to millions of Americans. As Nancy Reagan says, "There is just no more time to wait." And if the president wants to use his first veto on a bill to save lives, he will have to explain that to her, my wife and the rest of America.

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