

Will It Ever Be Over?

Is it possible to cheer and hold your breath at the same time? For most of the summer of 2011, U.S. human embryonic stem cell researchers and research advocates have celebrated a ruling by U.S. District Court Judge Royce Lamberth dismissing the lawsuit brought by James Sherley and Theresa Deisher. In September, advocates let out a collective gasp when Sherley and Deisher appealed Lamberth's ruling.

The Meaning of Dickey-Wicker

At its core, the lawsuit challenged the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) Guidelines for Human Stem Cell Research, claiming they violated a provision attached annually to the Departments of Labor, Health & Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill. The provision, known as the Dickey-Wicker Amendment, prohibits the use of federal funds to create human embryos for research purposes. Dickey-Wicker also blocks federal funding for "research in which a human embryo or embryos are destroyed, discarded, or knowingly subjected to risk."

A central part of the legal debate centered on the phrase "research in which" within the Dickey-Wicker amendment. Plaintiffs Sherley and Deisher argued that the phrase included past actions, including the privately funded derivation of stem cell lines. Judge Lamberth initially agreed with the plaintiffs, but the U.S. Court of Appeals overturned his ruling. In dismissing the case, Lamberth agreed with the higher court.

Is the End in Sight?

Stem cell research supporters have also been holding their collective breath. On September 19, 2011, the plaintiffs filed papers with the U.S. Court of Appeals announcing their intent to appeal Judge Lamberth's ruling.

Rep. Diana DeGette (D-CO) has reintroduced legislation that would codify President Obama's original Executive Order. At presstime Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) indicated that he would like to introduce a similar bill in the Senate.

The DeGette bill would not solve any of the "issues" that have been raised during the court case. In addition, it has little or no chance of becoming law. It is highly unlikely that the Republican leadership would bring the bill up on the House floor, and leaders in the Senate have said they do not intend to debate the bill in the Senate. ■

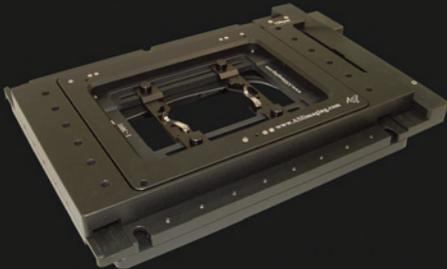
—Kevin M. Wilson

Are ASCB Emails Going Astray?

ASCB regularly sends emails to all members. If you haven't received one recently, you may need to "whitelist" ASCB in your email system. Contact your system administrator and request that email from @ascb.org be allowed. ■



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ASCB's Public Policy Committee: Your Voice in Washington

The members and staff of the ASCB Public Policy Committee (PPC) serve as the eyes, ears, and voices of ASCB members in Washington, DC.

The members of the PPC, led by Chair Doug Koshland, have the experience and enthusiasm as advocates for basic biological research. Members are often asked to brief Members of Congress and their staff about cutting-edge science policy issues and sometimes testify before congressional committees as expert witnesses.

PPC members also have strong relationships with the leadership at the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH). For example, when the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) was writing its strategic plan for research training, the ASCB was offered the opportunity to comment and make suggestions. Some of the comments made by the PPC are now part of the final strategic plan.

The primary area of concern for the PPC has been to make sure federal funding for both the NIH and the National Science Foundation (NSF) continue at a pace that allows critical biological research to move forward. The PPC also monitors congressional and Administration actions on stem cell research, cloning, indirect costs, alternative medicine, genetically modified foods, and immigration issues.

The day-to-day work of making sure federal policy is supportive of ASCB's members is left to ASCB Public Policy Director Kevin Wilson. Wilson, who worked in Congress for 15 years as a staff member in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, works with Members of Congress and their staff and federal agencies to make sure they understand what issues are important to you.

As Public Policy Director, Wilson monitors legislation in Congress, the debate in congressional committees, and votes in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. He also watches what is being said about the biological community in both the national press and in the science press to see how issues are being communicated and identify if, and when, the ASCB should weigh in.

Wilson is also in contact with his colleagues at other scientific organizations and in other

advocacy groups with similar interests to the ASCB. These connections help to build coalitions around common areas of interest. These coalitions, both formal and informal, help advance the interests of the ASCB. The ASCB has co-founded two formal coalitions, the Coalition for Life Sciences (CLS), which advocates for investigator-initiated basic research, and the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research (CAMR), which focuses on federal support for all types of human stem cell research. Science policy makers, including NIH Directors Elias Zerhouni and Francis Collins, National Cancer Institute Director Harold Varmus, and Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), regularly meet with the CLS Board of Directors to brief them and hear the concerns of the basic research community. Along with access to policymakers, the CLS grassroots efforts saw a sixfold increase in the number of scientist-advocates who wrote to their congressional representatives in 2011.

Since the founding of CAMR in early 2001, ASCB's Public Policy Directors have always held influential positions on the CAMR Board of Directors. Wilson currently serves as the Vice President of Science. This position has allowed Wilson and members of the PPC to play critical educational roles leading to the development of human embryonic stem cell legislation that has passed Congress twice, and in President Obama's Executive Order lifting President Bush's stem cell research policy.

Wilson is involved in informal coalitions that develop around specific issues. These informal groups range from support for NIH funds in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to a recent effort to involve industry in advocacy for the NIH.

Wilson is also the one who crafts the email messages asking ASCB members to contact their Members of Congress about important policy actions. He also helps organize and lead meetings on Capitol Hill with researchers.

Do you have questions about what is happening in Washington? Do you need some advice on how you can become more involved in science policy advocacy? Call or email Kevin Wilson at 301-347-9308 or kwilson@ascb.org. ■