Policy & Practice

Calif. Stem Cell Initiative Advances

Stem cell research efforts took another step forward in California when a state appeals panel ruled that an initiative to provide billions in funding for human embryonic stem cell research is constitutional. In 2004, voters approved Proposition 71, the California Stem Cell Research and Cures Act, which authorized the distribution of $3 billion in funding over 10 years. The initiative was challenged by two taxpayer advocacy groups and the California Family Bioethics Council for not revealing the entire scope of the project and for allowing for the distribution of state funds to groups not under the exclusive control of the state. A challenge to the proposition was defeated last year and the appeals panel rejected an appeal last month. In the meantime, the initiative has been moving forward and recently approved its first round of grants. The 72 grants, which will be funded with $45 million over 2 years, were selected from among more than 200 applications. The grants will fund various projects including the generation of a library of human embryonic stem cell lines that can model a number of human genetic diseases and experiments into how mutations in mitochondria affect the stability of human embryonic stem cells and their ability to develop into nerve cells.

Women's Health at the FDA

Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), Patty Murray (D-Wash.), and Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) have written a letter to Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Dr. Andrew von Eschenbach urging him to retain full funding for the agency's Office of Women's Health. "According to news reports, the FDA intends to reallocate $1.2 million in funding from the fiscal year 2007 budget of the Office of Women's Health to other uses. … As Congress moves forward with the budget and appropriations process, we will pursue every course to make certain that this funding is restored," the senators said in the letter, noting that Congress had allocated $4 million for the office. Phyllis Greenberger, president and CEO of the Society for Women's Health Research, noted that because the proposed cut represents a big chunk of the office's budget, it will probably have to shut down operations for the remainder of the year should the cut be made. "FDA leaders erroneously believe its various centers can fully address women's health needs on their own, something they have not demonstrated," she said in a statement.

Implementing Routine HIV Testing

Physicians need new tools and resources in order to implement revised recommendations for routine HIV testing of all patients aged 13-64 years from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to the consensus of various medical professional societies including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. ACOG was among the groups convened last year by the American Academy of HIV Medicine and the American Medical Association, in cooperation with the CDC, to discuss how best to implement the CDC's "Revised Recommendations for HIV Testing of Adults, Adolescents and Pregnant Women in Health Care Settings." The American Academy of HIV Medicine released a summary of the discussions in February. For example, physicians will need resources that systematically describe how to provide both positive and negative results to patients.

Assisted Reproductive Data Available

The Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology has released data on the success rates of its member clinics in 2005. The organization collected data from 343 clinics, which reported data on 122,683 treatment cycles in 2005. This is the second year that SART had published this type of outcome data. The information, which is available online at www.sart.org, is organized by state. Patients and physicians can see a summary page for each clinic and sort outcome data by diagnosis and treatment type. Patients can also use the Web site to request information directly from a clinic.

HEART for Women Reintroduced

The American Heart Association is throwing its weight behind the Heart Disease Education, Analysis and Research, and Treatment (HEART) for Women Act, which was reintroduced in both the House and Senate last month. Sponsored by Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) and Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), the legislation authorizes the Health and Human Services department to provide education to older women and health care professionals on the diagnosis and treatment of women with heart disease, requires gender-specific reporting of heart disease data to the federal government, and expands WISEWOMAN (Well-Integrated Screening and Evaluation for Women Across the Nation), the free heart disease and stroke screening program, beyond its current 14 states.

—Mary Ellen Schneider