POLICY & PRACTICE

S. Dakota Faces Abortion Referendum

The question of whether South Dakota's recently passed abortion ban will stand is likely to be decided by the voters. A coalition called the South Dakota Campaign for Healthy Families submitted more than 38,000 signatures to refer the state abortion ban to the ballot in November, exceeding the 16,728 signatures required under state law. South Dakota Gov. Mike Rounds (R) signed the ban into law in March. The law was set to take effect on July 1, but if enough signatures were certified as valid, the law was to be suspended pending the results of the November ballot referendum. If the ban takes effect it would make it a felony to perform an abortion except in cases where the mother's life is in danger. At press time, the South Dakota secretary of state's office was in the process of reviewing the signatures.

Harvard Launches Stem Cell Project

Scientists at Harvard University and Children's Hospital Boston have been given the green light to begin research using somatic cell nuclear transfer in an effort to develop treatments for diabetes, blood disorders, and neurodegenerative diseases. The research, which will involve human embryonic stem cells, will be privately funded since the federal government will not provide money for research using human embryonic stem cells derived after August 9, 2001. The efforts were praised by the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, which advocates for federal funding of stem cell research. "In the absence of federal support for and oversight of this type of research, CAMR is pleased that institutions like Harvard have taken the necessary steps to ensure that therapeutic cloning research happens in a manner fully consistent with the ethics and scientific standards in place for all research involving human subjects and tissues," CAMR President Sean Tipton said in a statement.

Women and Medical Research

More than 60% of women age 50 years and older who have participated in a medical research study would "definitely" or "probably" do it again, according to a survey released by the Society for Women's Health Research. The group commissioned the national telephone survey of more than 1,000 women age 50 years and older. A similar survey was conducted in 2003. Overall, 10% of women age 50 years and older have participated in some type of medical research, the 2006 survey found, down slightly from 12% in 2003. However, a growing number of women said they aren't interested in or don't believe in medical research in the 2006 survey. Nearly 16% of women surveyed cited lack of interest as a reason for not wanting to participate, compared with about 9% in the 2003 survey.

Postpartum Depression Targeted

A new bill, introduced in the U.S. Senate last month, aims to help find the cause and the cure for postpartum depression. The legislation would award grants to states to educate and screen new mothers for postpartum depression and support programs that assist women with postpartum depression. The Mom's Opportunity to Access Help, Education, Research, and Support for Postpartum Depression Act or the MOTHERS Act (S. 3529) was introduced by Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) and Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.). The so-called "baby blues" affect up to 80% of new mothers, with postpartum depression affecting 10%-20% of new mothers and postpartum psychosis occurring in 1:1,000 new mothers, according to the bill. The legislation calls on the secretary of Health and Human Services to organize a series of national meetings to develop a research plan for postpartum depression and psychosis. The plan should include basic research into the cause of postpartum conditions, epidemiologic studies looking at the natural history of the disorder, the development of improved diagnostic techniques, and clinical research into new treatments such as biologic agents, according to the legislation. The bill was referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

FDA Infected by Politics, Most Think

A majority of Americans—82%—believe the Food and Drug Administration is greatly influenced by politics when making decisions about the safety and efficacy of new prescription drugs, according to a Wall Street Journal online Harris Interactive poll. The finding was similar across parties, with 87% of Democrats, 77% of Republicans, and 88% of Independents saying they thought that politics outweighed science greatly or to some extent in decision-making. The survey of more than 2,300 adults was conducted in mid-May. In addition, almost 60% said the agency is doing a fair or poor job in ensuring the safety and efficacy of new drugs. Only 36% said the FDA was doing an excellent or good job. That is a reversal from 2 years ago, when 56% had a positive view, and 37% a negative view, of the FDA.

—Mary Ellen Schneider