

Ongoing policy uncertainty is detrimental for stem cell scientists

February 3 2011

While there is no doubt that the ethical controversy surrounding human embryonic stem cell (hESC) research has given rise to an uncertain policy environment, the true impact of years of frequent policy changes has not been fully assessed. Now, an article published by Cell Press on February 3rd in the journal *Cell Stem Cell* reports on a recent survey of several hundred stem cell scientists in the United States and begins to reveal the substantial negative impact that this uncertainty has had on them, including both those who work directly with hESCs and those who work with less contentious types of stem cells.

"In the [United States](#), scientists have faced several hESC policy changes with changing administrations," says author Dr. Aaron D. Levine from the School of Public Policy and Institute of Bioengineering and Bioscience at the Georgia Institute of Technology. "Most recently, a legal challenge to the Obama Administration's new stem cell policy led the federal government to briefly stop funding hESC research and to ongoing questions about the future of federal funding for this field."

To better understand the impact of this ongoing policy uncertainty, Dr. Levine conducted a survey of stem cell scientists in November 2010 which assessed how the temporary funding ban and uncertainty about the future of federal funding for hESC research was impacting their work. Scientists reported a range of negative impacts associated with both the temporary funding ban and the ongoing policy uncertainty, but were more likely to indicate that the continued policy uncertainty had a substantial impact on their research plans. Scientists reported changes to

the type or quality of science that they engaged in and delays in plans to begin new ESC projects and hire new staff, as well as hindered collaborations.

"It is interesting to note that much of the legal wrangling to date has focused on identifying which scientists are harmed by policy changes," explains Dr. Levine. "However, the results reported here conflict with judge's assertion that his ruling on the legal challenge would have little impact on hESC scientists and suggest that this injunction substantially changed the playing field for many hESC scientists in the United States as well as a lesser number of scientists working with other cell types." The author recommends that lawmakers who aim to support stem cell research should strive for policies that reduce uncertainty for stem cell scientists and provide a clear legal basis for federal funding of hESC research.

Provided by Cell Press

Citation: Ongoing policy uncertainty is detrimental for stem cell scientists (2011, February 3) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-02-ongoing-policy-uncertainty-detrimental-stem.html>

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