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REMARKS OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY IN SUPPORT OF STEM CELL RESEARCH

(As prepared for delivery)

Seven months ago, I stood here and called for passage of legislation to overturn the Bush Administration's unreasonable restrictions on embryonic stem cell research.

At that time, I emphasized the hope that stem cell research can bring to patients across America. But the President's rejection of our bill has generated new outrage that the promise of stem cell research has been denied to so many for so long.

Stem cell research brings hope to millions of Americans who seek better treatments and even the possibility of cures for cancer, diabetes, spinal injury, and many other serious conditions.

Patients across America are right to feel hope that stem cell research may lead to treatments and the discovery of cures. And they are also right to feel outrage that President Bush cast his veto last year on our bipartisan bill that offered so much hope to so many Americans.

That veto has added another year to the five years of missed opportunities and squandered opportunities that the President's arbitrary and ill-founded ban on embryonic stem cell research has cost patients across America.

The veto is another despicable example of science taking a back seat to politics in this Administration. Whether the issue is stem cell research, or climate change, or the battle against HIV/AIDS, the story is the same. Policies that should rest on science are decided instead by crass political calculations of what is needed to appease the most intransigent elements of the Republican base.

The time has come to say, "Enough! No more." Surely, if last November's election means anything, it means we must spare the country from policy calculations based solely on politics and a mentality that never admits the possibility of errors, and therefore refuse to correct them when they are made.

Today, we renew our hope that the President will start anew, and consider the merits of this new legislation, instead of automatically picking up his veto pen.

When Congress passed the bipartisan stem cell bill last year, we voted for hope, for progress, and for life.

But President Bush chose to dash those hopes by vetoing the legislation.

Now, we're taking up the cause once again. Our legislation again brings together conservatives and progressives—members of Congress on both sides of the debate over a woman's right to choose—representatives from big cities, small towns and rural areas. We all agree that stem cell research must go forward.

I commend Senator Reid for his leadership in giving the Senate this new opportunity to act on this.

The legislation before us is only six pages long. It's a short, simple bill with enormous goals and vast potential.

It overturns the unrealistic and unreasonable restrictions on embryonic stem cell research imposed by the President's Executive Order five years ago. His unilateral action bypassed Congress and froze progress in its tracks by barring NIH from funding research using any stem cells derived after August 9th, 2001—an arbitrary date chosen solely to coincide with the President's speech.

Many of us warned at the time that this policy would delay the search for new cures and put needless barriers in the way of medical progress. At a Health Committee hearing just days after the Executive Order was issued, many of us raised concerns about the new policy, and urged the President to reconsider. Our concerns were dismissed by the Administration, but time has shown that each of the drawbacks we feared of then has become a real barrier to progress today.

At the time of the Executive Order, the Administration claimed that over 60 independent stem cell lines would be available to NIH researchers. NIH initially listed 78 such lines in its registry. But time and the unalterable facts of science proved that two thirds of those lines are useless, or that claims about them proved to be an illusion. Today, only 22 stem cell lines are available to NIH researchers—and all of these were obtained using out of date methods and outmoded techniques.

Two months ago, Dr. Story Landis, the Chair of the NIH Stem Cell Taskforce, came before our committee and told Congress that all of these lines have genetic instabilities.

Each of the 22 lines is contaminated with animal tissue, because each was cultured on a so-called "feeder layer" of mouse cells. Techniques developed since 2001 have allowed scientists to grow stem cells without mouse cells, but the Executive Order prevents American patients from reaping the full benefit of these new discoveries because these new lines are off limits to NIH-funded scientists. As a result, in Dr. Landis' words, "we are missing out on possible breakthroughs."

Dr. Landis's grim assessment of the President's order was confirmed by the nation's top biomedical researcher, Dr. Elias Zerhouni, Director of the NIH. His judgment on the failure of the Administration's policies could not be clearer: "It is in the best interest of our scientists, our science and our country that we find ways and the nation finds a way to allow the science to go full speed across adult and embryonic stem cells equally." But that's exactly what is not happening because of the Administration's harsh restrictions.

Imagine what advances might have occurred if NIH had not been handcuffed and prevented from funding the best research efforts. As Dr. Zerhouni testified, "To sideline NIH in such an issue of importance, in my view, is shortsighted. I think it wouldn't serve the nation well in the long run." And it obviously hasn't served the nation well.

Both Dr. Landis and Dr. Zerhouni serve the Bush Administration, but they serve a higher calling too – the responsibility of all scientists to speak the truth. Congress and the American people owe them our gratitude for their courage and integrity to state in public that the policies of the Administration they serve are harming patients and delaying the search for new cures for serious diseases.

Our legislation makes the basic change needed to reverse this policy. But science without ethics is like a ship without a rudder. For this reason, our legislation also establishes essential ethical safeguards for stem cell research.

By bringing NIH to the forefront of stem cell research, we place far more research under the strong ethical protections that are part of every NIH grant. The bedrock principles of such research are informed consent and the requirement that all research be approved by an ethics committee before it is conducted. Our legislation prohibits payment for donation of cells. It forbids improper inducements to donate cells, and it mandates that all cells used must come from embryos that would not have been used to initiate a pregnancy.

Even with the intense debate on stem cells that has occurred in recent years, some people still believe that the cells are derived from fetuses, or from embryos that might otherwise have been used to start a pregnancy.

Both of these beliefs are wrong. Our legislation specifically requires that stem cells be derived "from human embryos that have been donated from in vitro fertilization clinics, were created for the purposes of fertility treatment, and were in excess of the clinical need of the individuals seeking such treatment."

In fertility clinics across the country, thousands of embryos are simply discarded—thrown away. We believe it is better to salvage embryos that would otherwise be destroyed, so that they can make the gift of life to patients who are suffering. Life is too precious to allow an opportunity to cure serious illness to be simply thrown in the trash.

Our legislation also authorizes new initiatives for obtaining stem cells from sources other than embryos. We strongly support the ongoing search for alternatives to embryonic stem cell research. But it's fundamentally wrong to shut down the promise of new cures while that search is underway.

In the end, this debate is not about abstract principles or complex aspects of science. It's about the people who look with hope to stem cell research to help them with the challenges they face.

During last year's debate, I read from a letter sent to me by 15 year-old Lauren Stanford, who has juvenile diabetes. In her letter, she wrote of her hope for what stem cell research means to her and her family. She wrote me again this year, and while she is still full of hope you can also hear her frustration. These are her words:

"I am now wearing what is called a Continuous Glucose Monitoring System. It has a wire probe that I insert under my skin every few days, on my own.

"When I first held the wire probe to my thigh, I was scared to death. The needle was huge, and I was going to be plunging it into my body.

"Would it hurt? What if it didn't work? Was it worth the risk? ... After about 20 minutes of sweating and shaking, I stopped chickening out and found the guts to do it.

"And then, as soon as I did it I knew almost immediately it was the right thing to do. It went in fine. It didn't hurt that much. And it's helping me."

Those were her words. She goes on to write to each of us about our decisions on how to vote on this legislation now. Here's what she writes: "Some of you might be scared to vote yes. You know it's the right thing to do; after all, if embryos are being discarded, how can it not be right to use them to help people like me?

"Your hand is lingering over the yes lever, just like mine was over that insertion device. You can see it might do some good . . . but you are afraid. Someone might get mad. It might hurt a little. But follow my lead. Be brave.

"Do something that might hurt a little or scare you for a second, but after will make so many things so much better. Vote yes to allow scientists to do this valuable research to free kids like me from horrible diseases. Vote yes and take another step along with me to finding cures.

"No one ever said doing the right thing, the brave thing, and the thing to make the world better would be easy. I've learned that the hard way. Vote yes. Free me from the machines that keep me alive. Clear away my future of kidney damage, blindness and fear of a shortened life."

Those are Lauren Stanford's words, and they compel us to act. Tomorrow, we can cast a vote

of conscience and courage. By approving the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act, we call upon the President of the United States to think anew, and decide not to veto hope.