

Joint Subcommittee Studying Medical, Ethical, and Scientific Issues Relating to Stem Cell Research

HJR 48

The Joint Subcommittee Studying Medical, Ethical, and Scientific Issues Relating to Stem Cell Research held its second meeting of the interim on October 17, 2006. The meeting was called to order by the Chairman, Delegate Robert G. Marshall. At its first meeting, the Joint Subcommittee decided to focus on the efforts of the Cord Blood Bank Initiative, which was passed in the 2006 General Assembly session. This second meeting therefore consisted of staff updates on the progress of the Initiative thus far.

The first presentation was given by staff on behalf of Dr. David Suttle of the Virginia Department of Health. Staff updated the subcommittee on the Health Department's progress in establishing the Cord Blood Bank Initiative. This presentation explained that the Health Department is just in the beginning stages of understanding the complex accreditation process, as well as feasibility and constraints within the existing appropriation. One problem that will need to be addressed is that of existing capacity. The Health Department is beginning to investigate the possibilities of expansion within existing facilities. They are also considering partnering with out-of-state entities for storage, or creating new capacity within the Commonwealth.

One of the most important next steps for the Health Department will be finding a subject matter expert to serve as project manager for the Initiative. They hope to find this expert by November of 2006, when they also plan to convene a statewide consortium of interested parties, and establish as task consortium subcommittees.

The second presentation detailed some of the current clinical trials relating to umbilical cord blood. Of the many trials detailed on ClinicalTrials.gov, a website maintained by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), staff summarized four which were particularly relevant to the work of the subcommittee. Each of the clinical trials involved using umbilical cord blood to treat different diseases, ranging from different types of cancers, to sickle cell disease, to type-one diabetes. All four studies are either fully or partially funded by NIH.

The final presentation was a review of legislation from the federal government and the other fifty states relating to cord blood banking. In December of 2005, President Bush signed H.R. 2520, which created a new federal program to collect and store cord blood, similar to the measure passed last session in Virginia. Currently, because of the language of the bill, Virginia's Cord Blood Bank Initiative is not compatible with the federal program. Because of the significant amount of federal funding involved, and because several states already have hospitals participating in the federal program, the subcommittee members wondered if perhaps they should consider taking part in this federal program.

Cord blood legislation from other states falls into three basic categories: (i) legislation to educate expectant mothers about umbilical cord blood banking, (ii) education awareness programs for the public on the benefits of cord blood banking, and (iii) legislation establishing public cord blood banks. Staff explained several differences between last year's legislation in Virginia and that of other states. For example, unlike some states, Virginia does not require that all pregnant women be notified of the opportunity to donate, and there is no requirement to educate the public about the difference between private and public cord blood banking.

After a short discussion, the joint subcommittee decided to hold a meeting in early November to hear an update from the Health Department on the progress of the Cord Blood Bank Initiative. This next meeting will also be a work session to develop ideas for possible legislation that the subcommittee may recommend during the 2007 General Assembly session. The final meeting will be held on November 30th, in order to review such legislation.