July 13, 2006

The Honorable Bill Frist
United States Senate
509 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Frist:

On behalf of the Association of American Universities, which represents 60 leading public and private research universities in the United States, I am writing to urge you to vote “yes” on H.R. 810, the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act. This legislation would broaden the current federal policy on human embryonic stem cell research to authorize federally funded research on cell lines derived from embryos developed for in-vitro fertilization (IVF) that otherwise would be discarded.

H.R. 810 has the potential to help millions of Americans who suffer from debilitating diseases and would ensure that human embryonic stem cell research is performed ethically. The creation of embryos for research purposes would not be permitted by H.R. 810. The new research allowed would be limited to stem cells derived from surplus and unused embryos created through in vitro fertilization (IVF). Indeed, only those embryos that would otherwise be destroyed could be used for research. H.R. 810 allows their use only with the informed consent of the donors. Moreover, to remove any possible incentive for the creation of embryos, donors would be prohibited from accepting compensation.

On August 9, 2001, President Bush announced a policy of allowing federally funded research using human embryonic stem cells. At the time of the President’s speech, it was thought that more than 60 human embryonic stem cell lines would be available for federally supported research under his policy. Today, the Human Embryonic Stem Cell Registry maintained by the National Institutes of Health lists only 16 sources of available stem cells that can be used in federally funded research. Only seven of these cell lines are held in the United States.

As a result, not only is the drive to combat disease being slowed, but at a time when our nation is anxious about its future scientific and economic competitiveness, our international leadership in perhaps the most promising field of biomedical research of our time is seriously threatened. In 1998, according to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 50 percent of the world’s scientific research papers on embryonic stem cell research came from the United States. Today that figure is down to 30 percent. In 1999 there were no stem cell research papers published by Asian authors. Today, Asian scientists are responsible for nearly 25 percent of such research papers.

On Monday, the Senate will begin consideration of the Stem Cell Research Enhancement...
Act (H.R. 810), the Fetus Farming Prohibition Act of 2006 (S. 3504), and the Alternative Pluripotent Stem Cell Therapies Enhancement Act (S. 2754). On Tuesday, the Senate will vote on these bills, with each needing 60 votes to pass.

The House passed H.R. 810 on May 24, 2005, on a bipartisan vote of 238-194, and the bill has strong bipartisan support in the Senate. A vote for H.R. 810, and this bill alone, is a vote to advance stem cell research. A vote against H.R. 810 will be considered a vote against research and cures.

America’s leading research universities neither endorse nor oppose S. 2754, the so-called "alternative" stem cell derivation bill, and S. 3504, a bill to ban "fetus farming." However, these bills would have no real impact on current federal stem cell research policy, and support for them will certainly not offset the negative effect of a “no” vote on H.R. 810.

Please vote in favor of H.R. 810 to accelerate the hope and promise of stem cell research and to ensure that the United States maintains its leadership role in the ethical development of new cures and therapies for all of mankind.

Sincerely,

Robert M. Berdahl
President