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Even without a bill on abortion, it's a hot topic

Lawmakers likely to address related legislation

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There might not be an abortion bill presented during this legislative session, but that doesn't mean both sides of the issue won't have plenty to talk about.

The Kansans for Life agenda still has proposals for what they call "life issues" that are sure to stir the pot. Among those proposals is one defining an unborn child as a human and an attempt to restrict embryonic stem cell research.

"We intend to be active this legislative session," said Rep. Lance Kinzer, R-Olathe, who last year offered a budget amendment that would have banned tax-funded human cloning. "I don't think the life issue is by any means a secondary issue."

The question remains, however, whether these issues can make it through a Statehouse that in recent years has shot down similar legislation.

Human cloning

The day after Missouri voters passed an amendment to allow embryonic stem cell research in the state, Gov. Kathleen Sebelius said she would be interested in something similar for Kansas. Kinzer's proposal to ban tax-payer funded research last year was stripped at the last minute.

But anti-abortion activists are back this year, and according to Rep. Brenda Landwehr, R-Wichita and chairwoman of the House Health and Human Services, a bill to ban human cloning will be introduced sometime this week.

That ban would cover what is known as somatic cell nuclear transfer, or SCNT, in which researchers replace the nucleus of an unfertilized human egg with the nucleus of another cell, stimulate growth in the lab and harvest the resulting embryonic stem cells.

"I want to look at if we should allow SCNT research in Kansas and if tax payers' dollars should be used to fund that," Kinzer said. "My answer to both of those is 'no.' "

Opponents of the ban say researchers should be given a chance to find cures they say might be out there.

"There's a broad consensus to prohibit human cloning, but that's not what we're talking about," said Rep. Jim Ward, D-Wichita. "We want to support cutting-edge science that could provide cures."

For Rep. Marti Crow, D-Leavenworth, the issue hits a little closer to home. She said her mother is currently fighting pancreatic cancer and her brother-in-law has diabetes.

"If I was weighing my brother-in-law's health versus an embryonic stem cell, I would have to ere on the side of my brother-in-law," she said.

But proponents of the ban say there is no proof that it works. Kathy Ostrowski, legislative lobbyist for Kansans for Life, said other stem cells from amniotic fluid and umbilical chords have shown promise but that embryonic stem cells have provided zero cures.

"The pro-cloners are the modern snake oil salesmen," said Ostrowski. "They're telling people, 'Don't worry, let us do whatever we want to do and eventually we'll come up with a cure for Parkinson's and Alzheimer's.'"

Alexa's Law

The other issue sure to draw attention this year is Alexa's Law, which came about after the recent brutal slaying of a pregnant woman in Wichita who was weeks from delivering a baby she had already named Alexa. The bill wouldn't apply to a mother or medical professional but does classify an unborn child as a "person" and "human being" under the Kansas criminal code.

The exact bill was offered two years ago but died in the Senate. Current law already increases penalties for injuring or killing a pregnant woman but doesn't allow prosecution specifically for the fetus.

"If you kill a pregnant woman, you should be charged with a second crime," said Sen. Tim Huelskamp, R-Fowler.

Ostrowski called the proposal a justice law and said it isn't intended to affect the abortion debate. Opponents say that is exactly the intent.

"It's an attempt to disguise this bill as protecting wanted pregnancies, but it's really an attempt by anti-choice lawmakers to erode a woman's right to choose," said Traci Gleason, spokeswoman for Planned Parenthood of Kansas and Mid-Missouri.

Some Democrats said they have no problem with increased penalties for crimes against a pregnant woman.

"Everybody wants justice for somebody who was killed," said Rep. Barbara Ballard, D-Lawrence. "But if your bill is doing something else, if it's really just a pro-life bill, just say so."

Kinzer said similar laws already exist across the country.

"Hopefully, people will look at those other states and see that it's not the camel trying to get its nose under the tent," he said.

Compromise?

So what has changed from past years when similar proposals have failed? For Alexa's Law, the recent slaying might add some punch to the debate, especially for those legislators from the Wichita area. Some also point to the makeup of key committees.

"If you look at the chair and vice chair of the (House Health and Human Services Committee), these are their primary issues," Ward said.

Democrats and Republicans say the House probably has the needed votes to pass such bills. The question mark is in the Senate. Crow said she thinks both sides of the aisle can agree on certain issues of life, but politics have created a chasm she isn't sure they can bridge.

"It's become such a polarizing conversation, and as it has gone on, instead of a dialogue, it's become a monologue," she said.

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