

Did California's \$3 billion stem cell bet pay off?

It was an extraordinary political proposal: Approve a \$3 billion bond measure to fund the cutting-edge science of stem cell therapy, and soon some of the world's cruelest diseases and most disabling injuries could be eradicated. The 2004 measure was Proposition 71, the California Stem Cell Research and Cures Initiative.

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At UCLA, doctors are using stem cells to cure a rare immune deficiency disease that kills children. At Stanford, early studies show that stem cells deposited deep into the brain could restore movement and speech to people devastated by stroke. At UCSF, a team is beginning human trials for a fatal genetic blood disease that involves transplanting stem cells into a fetus still in the uterus.

But as thrilling as such advances are, they fall far short of what Prop. 71's promoters promised.

Not a single federally approved therapy has resulted from CIRM-funded science. The predicted financial windfall has not materialized. The bulk of CIRM grants have gone to basic research, training programs and building new laboratories, not to clinical trials testing the kinds of potential cures and therapies the billions of dollars were supposed to deliver.

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"What was promised was not deliverable," said longtime CIRM board member Jeff Sheehy, a former San Francisco supervisor. "However, I would distinguish the promises from the impact and value. We have developed a regenerative medicine juggernaut."

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