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## Op-Ed: Embryonic stem-cell ban shows state isn't serious

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ANN ARBOR -- Sean Morrison, the 39-year-old director of the University of Michigan's Center for Stem Cell Biology, is a rarity among scientists. Personable, well-spoken and easygoing, he seems as much at ease with the media as he is in the laboratory.

But he must be one of the most frustrated men in the state. By all accounts a brilliant young geneticist, he has the resources of one of the nation's major universities and a background in what is the cutting-edge frontier of biology: stem-cell research.

Yet he has the misfortune to be working in a state with some of the most repressive and restrictive laws forbidding embryonic stem cell research. Early on, President Bush's administration denied government funding to anyone conducting embryonic stem cell research on any new material other than some in use in 2001.

That was seen as ridiculous by all but the religious right. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a fellow Republican, campaigned for a state initiative that successfully raised \$10 billion for embryonic stem cell research. Two prominent pro-life U.S. Senators, Orrin Hatch of Utah and former Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, called embryonic stem cell research "the pro-life position."

But in Michigan, embryonic stem cell research is itself outlawed, thanks to the iron grip that Right to Life of Michigan has over much of the Legislature. The only other states with a total ban on such research are Louisiana, Arkansas and North and South Dakota.

With the possible exception of Louisiana, none of those states has the facilities to do cutting-edge research anyway. Michigan does. Morrison, a native of Canada, knows that in Toronto, work with embryonic stem cells has reversed macular degeneration in rats.

He knows that there is tremendous potential, economic as well as scientific, in stem-cell research.

Yet for now, that is impossible. State Rep. Paul Condino, D-Southfield, has a package of bills now before the House Judiciary Committee that would repeal the bans on stem cell research. Polls show a solid majority of Michiganders are in favor of this type of research. But thanks to the lobbying and fundraising efforts of Right to Life of Michigan, those bills' chances are seen as dim in the House, and nonexistent in the GOP-controlled Senate.

Then last month, a stunning new development seemed likely to turn the entire world of stem-cell biology upside down.

Separate teams of scientists in Wisconsin and Japan reported they had successfully genetically reprogrammed human skin cells to take on all the properties of embryonic stem cells. Right-to-lifers hailed this discovery as ending the debate once-and-for all.

Others, more skeptical, wondered if this was another case of "cold fusion in a jar," the 1989 alleged energy breakthrough that left a lot of scientists and journalists looking sheepish afterwards.

In an interview, Morrison said more study is clearly needed. "I hope this does work out. Potentially, these cells would be easier to work with than embryonic stem cells. But there is a lot of research to do with both methods."

Morrison spends more time than he would like refuting lies and misconceptions. Over and over he explains patiently that embryonic stem-cell research doesn't use aborted fetuses.

What it uses, where it is legal, are discarded, tiny clumps of cells from fertility clinics, groups of 50 to 150 cells called blastocysts.

The cells Morrison wants to use wouldn't otherwise become a baby. Fertility clinics make far more embryos than they can use.

Eventually, they are thrown out. "So in Michigan, it's legal to dispose of these embryos, throw them away, but not to use them to do research," to find cures for diseases, he said.

As it stands now, he said, Michigan is sending "a message to the world" that the state isn't serious about the life sciences.

For a state leading the nation in unemployment and desperately in need of new jobs and industries, that's not a good thing.

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