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Group starts drive to educate, end ban on embryonic stem cell research

Restrictive law helps other states make gains, members say

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BY SHARON EMERY

Ann Arbor News Bureau

LANSING - Michigan's major universities will be left behind unless the state's restrictive policies on embryonic stem cell research are changed soon, say backers of a new coalition targeting what they say is considerable misinformation on the issue in Michigan.

Parents with sick children, policy makers and business and university representatives were among those launching Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures at the Capitol Monday.

"Michigan has significant assets invested in universities and firms, and we don't want these assets to be squandered," Democratic U.S. Sen. Carl Levin of Detroit said at a press conference that also included Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz of Battle Creek.

Warning that Western Michigan, Wayne State and Michigan State universities, as well as the University of Michigan, could all suffer as a result of Michigan's policies, Schwarz cautioned against "creating barriers at our state lines."

He said other states, including California, New York and New Jersey, were quickly running away with the economic prize offered by the nascent life sciences industry.

The nonprofit, nonpartisan group plans to educate the public about stem cell research in forums throughout the state in coming months. Its Web site is at <http://www.stemcellresearchformichigan.com>.

The group itself is solely

devoted to education. Backers clearly hope the public will lean on the Republican-

controlled Legislature, which

is resisting bills sponsored by

Rep. Andrew Meisner,

D-Ferndale, to ease prohibitions on stem cell research that are among the most restrictive in the nation.

The process of extracting stem cells from an embryo

destroys it, and Michigan law forbids any research that harms an embryo.

Opponents of changing

Michigan's law, including the Michigan Catholic Conference and Right to Life of Michigan, say the sanctity of human life is at stake.

"You don't sacrifice one

human life to save another," said Dave Maluchnik of the Catholic conference. "We must search for ethical ways to help those who are suffering from debilitating diseases," including research using adult stem cells.

He pointed to GOP-

sponsored bills establishing a statewide network of umbilical-cord-blood stem cell banks that he said would not only boost medical cures but also the economy. Cord blood and bone marrow are key sources of adult stem cells. One of the bills would fund the effort with \$5 million from the 21st

Century Jobs Fund.

Earlier this month, the state awarded \$45.7 million from the fund to 25 life sciences

companies, to help create jobs in the emerging industry.

How effective adult stem cells are in curing disease is up for debate. Backers of embryonic stem cell research believe all known tools should be used.

Cathy Coury, of the West Michigan Juvenile Diabetes

Research Foundation and

mother of two sons with the

disease, said she wants to be able to tell her 8-year-old and 12-year-old that Michigan is working to help them.

"I want to know that researchers here are pursuing every cure possible," said Coury, of Caledonia.

Sean Morrison, director of the U-M Center for Stem Cell

Biology, acknowledged the

pressure of that resolve.

"You can't stand where I stand without feeling a sense of urgency" to find cures and treatments for diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and cancer.

Life sciences is a \$4.8 billion industry in Michigan, with more than 540 companies employing nearly 32,000 workers, according to MichBio, an industry trade group.

Stephen Rapundalo, executive director of MichBio, an Ann Arbor-based biotechnology trade group, said life science companies may sense "hostility" to their work in Michigan. That could have negative consequences when it comes to attracting talent and venture capital, he said.

"We can't be seen as not open for business," Rapundalo said.

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