



Published April 19, 2007

Democratic lawmakers take up embryonic stem cell research issue

Tim Martin
Associated Press

A coalition including some advocacy groups and Democratic state lawmakers is reviving efforts to remove barriers on embryonic stem cell research in Michigan.

There is a long-running, philosophical rift over the research at both the state and federal levels. Some groups would rather focus on adult stem cell research, avoiding ethical questions about research involving embryos.

The group announcing the introduction of legislation Thursday and many scientists say embryonic research holds the most promise for medical breakthroughs related to Parkinson's disease, juvenile diabetes, spinal injuries and a host of other maladies.

Michigan has some of the most restrictive rules in the nation for embryonic stem cell research. Supporters of loosening those restrictions say it would help Michigan attract life science companies and boost the state's economy.

Rep. Andy Meisner, D-Ferndale, introduced similar bills in the last session of the Legislature, but they did not advance in a chamber that then was under Republican control.

Democrats hold a 58-52 advantage in the chamber this year, but that is no guarantee Meisner's bills will pass. House Speaker Andy Dillon, D-Redford, has said he would not block a vote on embryonic stem cell research but that he would vote against the bills as introduced last session.

There are some Republicans, however, who supported the legislation last year.

Meisner has changed the bills this year in the hopes of getting broader support.

The legislation would require informed, written consent from donors before

embryos left over from fertility clinics could be donated to research. Embryo donors could not receive any financial or other benefit.

If not used for research, the embryos remaining from fertility clinic processes would be thrown out as medical waste, Meisner said.

"Certainly no one could argue that it's better to put an embryo in the garbage than it is to use for medical research," he said. "And that's what we're restricting the legislation to today."

Meisner said the legislation includes a stronger ban and punishment for human cloning, making it a 15-year felony.

Those changes won't be enough to convert all of the legislation's critics, many of whom oppose it because it would allow human embryos to be destroyed to harvest their stem cells.

Stem cells are rare cells in tissues that give rise to most other cells. The bills would allow what some call "therapeutic cloning," or cloning for research purposes. The process is also called somatic cell nuclear transfer.

The process involves removing the nucleus of an unfertilized egg and replacing it with material from another cell in the human body, then stimulating it to grow so stem cells can be harvested. Some say the resulting creation should not be called an embryo, but others say it is an embryo.

"There is absolutely no need for (the legislation), and it's going to open the door to cloning human embryos," said Ed Rivet of Right to Life of Michigan, which opposes the bills introduced Thursday. "Get them to say we're cloning and destroying embryos and you'll be getting the truth about this legislation."

Michigan law allows research on stem cells that are obtained from adults, which does not raise the same ethical concerns for some groups.

The stem cell debate is ongoing in many states and in Congress.