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Michigan stem cell research proposal advances

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LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Supporters of a ballot measure that would loosen Michigan's restrictions on embryonic stem cell research took a big step toward placing it on the November ballot.

The Stem Cell Research Ballot Question Committee said Monday it turned in more than 570,000 voter signatures backing the measure. More than 380,000 of them must be ruled valid for the proposal to reach voters.

Backers say embryonic stem cell research holds the potential to help treat or cure diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, cancer, sickle cell anemia and diabetes.

The politically diverse group that helped launch the campaign Monday included former Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz and former Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Larry Owen.

"It is research that we know has a high chance of curing many diseases and saving many lives," said Owen, the campaign chairman.

Opponents raise ethical concerns because the research involves the use and destruction of human embryos. The Michigan Catholic Conference and Right to Life of Michigan oppose the proposal and an opposition group called Michigan Citizens Against Unrestricted Science and Experimentation is forming.

"The proposal is deliberately deceptive," group spokesman David Doyle said. "It's the confusing legalese that is the problem."

Ballot proposal supporters countered that their opponents are the ones misrepresenting the issues. Supporters are trying to make the ballot because their efforts to change state law have failed in the Legislature.

Some embryonic stem cell research is allowed in Michigan. But the state's laws related to the research are among the nation's most restrictive, allowing only the use of stem cell lines from California, Illinois or other states with less restrictive laws. Those lines sometimes are patented by other researchers.

Ballot proposal supporters say changing Michigan's law would help broaden the type of available stem cell lines, opening up new avenues for potential cures and eventually drawing more research money to the state.

The proposal would change Michigan law to allow research on donated embryos created during fertility treatments that otherwise would be discarded. It's now a state felony to use new embryonic stem cells for research.

Supporters of the proposal to amend the constitution say it protects and strengthens Michigan's ban on human cloning. The proposal says nothing in it "shall alter Michigan's current prohibition on human cloning."

Opponents say the proposal does not explicitly put a ban on human cloning in the state constitution, so cloning could be allowed if state law is ever changed to permit it.

Stem cells are rare cells in tissues that give rise to most other cells. While many scientists say embryonic stem cell research holds the most medical versatility and potential, critics are upset that stem cells are harvested from adults or umbilical cords.

On the Net:

Stem Cell Research Ballot Question Committee: <http://www.curemichigan.com>

Michigan Citizens Against Unrestricted Science and Experimentation: <http://www.micause.com>