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### Change critical to biotech industry, advocates say

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**BY TRACY DAVIS**

**News Staff Reporter**

As Pfizer prepares to close its Ann Arbor doors, many in the Michigan biotech industry have begun asking what the state must do to attract more business.

Among the answers are an emerging demand that Michigan must revisit its laws regarding embryonic stem cell research.

While Pfizer officials say their decision had nothing to do with stem cell research laws here, advocates say this is a long-standing issue the state can ill afford to further ignore.

Several scientists, academics and public officials told The News it's time for Michigan to change its standing as one of the two most restrictive states in the country - South Dakota is the other - when it comes to stem cell research. It's critical for the health of the state's biotech industry, and for the economy in general, they said.

"Michigan is in a circumstance, not only from Pfizer, that we're in the middle of a difficult transition that's occurring because of changes in our traditional industries," University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman said in a recent interview. "Everything needs to be on the table. We need to look at what our climate is and how welcoming we are. Can we pursue the most promising (scientific) leads here? If there was ever time we need the state to have a wake-up, the time is now, in my view."

Sean Morrison, director of U-M's Center for Stem Cell Biology and one of the leading local advocates for change to Michigan's laws, agrees.

"The stem cell laws that we have in this state are one reason why people in the rest of country look at Michigan as an 'also-ran' when it comes to developing it as a biotechnology (center)," he said. "... It sends a message loud and clear that Michigan is not serious about having a biotech industry."

The move would still face formidable opposition among legislators. Although the state house is now controlled by Democrats, stem cells have yet to emerge on their agenda.

Dan Farough, spokesman for new House Speaker Andy Dillon, D-Redford Township, said that while Dillon is personally opposed to embryonic stem cell research, he would not prevent new legislation from coming to a vote. That means it could see a vote this year, he said.

If it doesn't, voters are likely to bring it as a referendum, Granholm said in an interview with The News.

"It's way overdue," said Granholm, who addressed the need for legislative change in her State of the State addresses for the past two years.

The issue also faces opposition among individuals and organizations who say that embryonic stem cell research is still, ultimately, the destruction of potential life. The powerful Michigan Catholic Conference and

Right to Life both oppose the destruction of embryos that is necessary to obtain the stem cells and nationally, some conservative groups have advocated "embryo adoption."

After Granholm's State of the State address earlier this month, the Michigan Catholic Conference's policy Vice President, Paul Long agreed investing in Michigan's people was critical.

"...But how can we invest in people if one issue for which the governor is advocating prevents scores of individuals from entering our state in the first place?" he said. "Cloning and killing human embryos represents an ideology that will not move our state forward; rather, it will reduce human life to a devalued commodity merely created and destroyed in a laboratory for experimental purposes."

Michigan law prevents the destruction of embryos for stem-cell research, which means new stem cell lines can't be created.

Advocates have long pointed out that fertility clinics routinely discard unused embryos.

"The thing about that that's crazy is human embryos are discarded all the time by fertility clinics," Morrison said. "So it's legal to throw them away, but it's not legal to use them to try to help somebody."

Federally approved stem cell lines created before 2001 are available. Scientists say their quality has declined. Only about a third are still viable. All the lines were grown on a layer of mouse cells, which means they could be contaminated by mouse proteins and viruses, according to a 2005 Science News report.

Perception of Michigan's research climate is a big part of the problem, advocates say. Because of the laws, the state has a reputation as not being research-friendly, some say, even for scientists whose work has nothing to do with stem cells.

"The laws we have on the books have a chilling effect on the ability to do research in Michigan," Coleman said. Although the university has successfully lured top researchers, they always ask questions about it, she said, adding that she thought their success would not last forever if things don't change.

Former Pfizer scientist Stephen Rapundalo, who now heads the nonprofit MichBio, agreed.

"Any time you put roadblocks in front of the pursuit of research, then that will certainly impact people's views on whether or not they should be wanting to do research here in the state, private or public sector," said Rapundalo, who also serves on the Ann Arbor City Council. "What happens is they then begin to question what else. If you're not being open-minded about this one area, what else are you not going to be open-minded about in other areas they wish to pursue, today or tomorrow?"

The laws also have repercussions for existing biotech businesses.

"Our clients are the other companies doing research," said James Eliason, chief scientific officer at Detroit-based Asterand, a research services company. "The fewer people coming into Michigan, the fewer customers and collaborators we can have."

Polls show public support for embryonic stem cell research has been on the rise. A 2006 national poll by the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research showed 72 percent of the public supports embryonic stem-cell research.

State Rep. Andy Meisner, D-Ferndale is planning to reintroduce his legislation that would change stem cell laws this winter. His previous efforts never made it to a vote.

Addressing fears that some have that embryonic stem cell research could lead to unregulated human cloning, he echoed what many others said in that no one is advocating for that. He also said he planned to introduce legislation that would make doing so a 15-year felony.

"The public support is overwhelming," he said. "I just hope we have the political support as well."

Tracy Davis can be reached at [tdavis@annarbornews.com](mailto:tdavis@annarbornews.com) or 734-994-6856.

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