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Stem cell research limits hurt Michigan Legislators need to change restrictions

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What are the two most restrictive states in the country regarding embryonic stem cell research?

South Dakota - and Michigan.

We're also in the company of Arkansas, Louisiana and North Dakota. These states have laws limiting embryonic stem cell research, and it's not a group we're proud to be part of.

There's a chance that we can divorce ourselves, but it'll take backbone from our state legislators to do so.

"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)," Sean Morrison, director of the University of Michigan's Center for Stem Cell Biology, recently told The News. "... It sends a message loud and clear that Michigan is not serious about having a biotech industry."

That industry in Michigan took a blow in January when Pfizer announced plans to close its Ann Arbor research facility by 2008. The pharmaceutical firm employs just over 2,100 people here, and countless others depend on Pfizer and its employees for their livelihoods. But the closure is more than a jobs hit - it's a psychic hit as well.

Though Pfizer remains a major employer in the Kalamazoo area, its withdrawal from Ann Arbor shows how vulnerable we are to decisions made in distant corporate boardrooms. Nothing is a given, and complacency isn't an option.

That's why reform to our laws regarding stem cell research is critical.

"Everything needs to be on the table," U-M Mary Sue Coleman told The News. "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..."

Michigan law forbids destroying human embryos for research, even if that research yields treatments for life-threatening diseases. Yet fertility clinics regularly discard unused embryos. This disconnect is stunning.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has said she'd support easing restrictions on stem cell research, but no one has yet introduced legislation on the issue. There was virtually no chance of action under a Republican-controlled legislature, and even with Democrats now in the majority in the House, it's unclear if they'll make it a priority.

If they do, groups like the Michigan Catholic Conference and Right to Life will certainly marshal resources to oppose any change to current law.

But this is a battle worth fighting. Michigan's economy is undergoing an agonizing transformation after decades of coasting on the coattails of a powerful domestic auto industry. That industry itself is in a mighty

struggle for survival, and efforts to diversify our economy - including efforts to build our biotech and life sciences businesses - are a necessary piece of the state's economic transformation.

A change in Michigan's law wouldn't be the kind of aggressive support we see in states like California, where voters approved \$3 billion over 10 years to fund stem cell research. In comparison, easing restrictions on Michigan's embryonic stem cell use would be a relatively modest step.

But in comparison to current conditions, it would keep us in the running with most of the country. And at the least, we need to be able to compete in that race.

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