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Stem-cell research debate comes to Albion

BY ELIZABETH HUFF

ALBION — Panel experts revealed a significant development in embryonic stem cell research to about 90 people on Wednesday night at an open public forum hosted by Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures at Albion College.

California scientists recently announced they were able to control diabetes in mice by implanting human embryonic stem cells, a Michigan Citizens spokesman said.

It furthers the debate, fueled by moral and religious objection, as to whether human embryonic stem cells can and should be used in research that could cure diseases such as juvenile diabetes, Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis, former U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz, R-Battle Creek, said.

Embryonic stem cells are able to become any one of more than 200 different cells in the body, he said. Adult stem cells when harvested have already begun the differentiation process, and so are limited to what kind of tissues or organs they can become.

"There is a great deal of opposition, particularly from the Catholic Church and Right to Life of Michigan," Schwarz said. "The only thing I would ask the opposition to do is tell the truth."

According to panel expert Gary Dunbar, director of neuroscience at Central Michigan University, one-third of the thousands of unused cells created in fertility therapy petri dishes that could be used in stem cell research are discarded daily.

That fact swayed Allegra Wrocklage, 16, of Farmington Hills, to believe embryonic stem cell research may be a good option for Michigan. Currently Michigan is one of five states that severely restricts embryonic stem cell research, Schwarz said.

"Otherwise, the embryos would be thrown in the trash," Wrocklage said.

James Eliason, who works for an international human tissue bank, said Michigan law sends an unwelcome message to biotechnology companies.

"My company, we have a lab in England," he said. "We could do it (embryonic stem cell research) there, but it doesn't bring jobs to Michigan."

Amy Markham, a 20-year-old Albion College junior, said she wasn't sure the benefits to research and the state economy would outweigh the results. She saw embryonic stem cell research as the beginning of a slippery slope toward human cloning, which she opposes. "I think it's playing with fire," she said.