

Legislation on stem cells stirs debate in state

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Proponents of medical research that uses stem cells derived from human embryos renewed their campaign Thursday to remove barriers in Michigan law they say are turning the state into a scientific backwater.

State Rep. Andrew Meisner, D-Ferndale, chief sponsor of the stem-cell legislation, said Michigan's restrictions drive researchers out of the state, hamper job growth and, most important, limit Michiganders' access to potential life-saving cures.

Research and investment in stem-cell therapies are surging around the country and around the world, Meisner said at a news conference.

"The rest of the world is leaving us behind," Meisner said.

Backers of the legislation said the 2007 proposals include compromise language to address the concerns of religious and stem cell opponent organizations whose opposition doomed similar legislation in 2005-06. The source of embryos would be limited to "excess or damaged" embryos from fertility clinics and donors could not be paid.

But those provisions seemed unlikely to ease opposition.

Ed Rivet, legislative director for Right to Life of Michigan, said the central objections to the proposal remain unchanged. The legislation would authorize the destruction of nascent human life to conduct research and permit researchers to create cloned human embryos, he said. Both are repugnant to a majority of legislators, he said.

Daniel Heumann, an Ann Arbor attorney who heads an organization devoted to spinal cord research and a backer of the stem-cell legislation, conceded Thursday that its prospects in the Legislature are not markedly improved over last year. Heumann said, however, the coalition of groups and politicians behind the bills are prepared to mount a petition drive to place the issue before voters in 2008 if no action is taken at the Capitol this year.

According to its advocates, embryonic stem-cell research holds the promises of producing therapies for a wide range of debilitating and otherwise irreversible conditions, including Parkinson's disease, juvenile diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and spinal cord injuries.

Opponents say those claims are overstated, and say research should be focused on the development of stem-cell lines from bone marrow, umbilical cord blood and other sources that do not require the destruction of embryos.