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Stem cell campaign debated

Embryonic study backers dispute dioceses' assertions

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Proponents of embryonic stem cell research challenged the Michigan Catholic Conference on Monday for its information in a massive educational campaign launched by the collection of dioceses this week.

The campaign, Finding Cures & Protecting Life, is the church's attempt to explain to Catholics why it supports adult stem cell research but opposes research on embryonic stem cells. The campaign includes a 12-minute DVD that will be sent to the homes of 500,000 registered Catholics statewide.

"Adult stem cell research is ethical because it does not harm the individual and has been shown to find treatments for over 70 medical conditions," said Paul Long, vice president for public policy of the Michigan Catholic Conference.

"Embryonic stem cell research is immoral because it necessitates the destruction of the human embryo and it's unproven: It has no treatments or cures."

Stem cell advocates are pleased the campaign will heighten awareness of the stem cell debate, but say there are errors.

The embryos that researchers want to study in their quest for cures to debilitating diseases are already being destroyed, said Marcia Baum, executive director of Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures.

Scientists want to study unused embryos originally created for fertility clinic patients, Baum said.

Only about one-third of the fertilized cells from prospective parents are actually used in conception and the remaining two-thirds are frozen and eventually disposed of as medical waste.

"Proponents of embryonic stem cell research want to prevent the destruction of those embryos," Baum said. "Many people believe that's really pro-life."

Baum added that the 70 treatments developed through adult stem research come from a study that has been under fire in the scientific community.

"It's important for the church to lay out its position," Long said. "It's never morally right to kill a human being for the benefit of another human being for scientific purposes."

The campaign comes as advocates are discussing putting an initiative on the November 2008 ballot that would lift restrictions on embryonic stem cell research in Michigan, one of the most restrictive states in the nation.

The Michigan Catholic Conference, which represents seven dioceses, has lobbied and prevailed in its opposition to a number of political issues, such as Medicaid-funded abortions and assisted suicide.

But it launched this campaign because it is an issue that has come into the forefront of human life issues, not for political reasons, Long said.

The topic will be focused on by 800 parishes statewide this weekend during Respect Life Sunday, the church's day to teach about its anti-abortion position in the context of contemporary issues.