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Michigan fights for stem cell cash

But state's restrictive laws drive away business, advocates say
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Michigan is losing businesses, jobs and some of its best scientists because of restrictive embryonic stem cell research laws, according to scientists and others seeking to change the research climate.

Though proponents have long touted the promise embryonic stem cells hold for people with incurable diseases, they are beginning to focus on Michigan's missed economic opportunities.

"Other states are seeing embryonic stem cell research has major economic development potential ... and are moving into this area in a big way because they smell jobs," said David Waymire, a spokesman for Michigan Stem Cell Research and Cures. "One hundred years ago, a small operation run by a guy named Henry Ford spawned a vast industry. We should be careful not to tell the Henry Fords of stem cell research that Michigan is closed for business."

Embryonic stem cell research, however, has vocal opponents, who say it involves taking human life and could eventually lead to human cloning, which is immoral.

The Michigan Catholic Conference this month launched an aggressive campaign by mailing DVDs to hundreds of Catholic homes and asking priests to speak on the issue during Mass.

Right to Life of Michigan and others say adult stem cell research, which is allowed in Michigan, has developed the most potential treatments for disease thus far, and treatments and cures can be found without destroying human embryos.

They point to people like Jeni Rummelt, a Grand Rapids woman who is paralyzed from the waist down. She is slowly gaining mobility and sensation from physical therapy and her own adult stem cells, which she receives in Russia through a treatment that is not approved in the U.S.

"It could take a few more years until I walk again, but it's worth it," said Rummelt, 32.

Gov wants laws loosened

Scientists say most of the embryos they want to study are being thrown away as medical waste from fertility clinics, yet they hold great promise for better therapies and possibly cures for diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and juvenile diabetes.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has advocated loosening Michigan's embryonic stem cell laws, which subject researchers to up to five years in prison for using human embryos in non-therapeutic research.

The state has not conducted any economic impact studies regarding the business of embryonic stem cell research. This contrasts sharply with other states, such as California, Massachusetts and New Jersey, which have done studies and invested billions of state dollars as a result.

California has taken the lead nationally by passing a ballot issue that allowed the state to invest \$3 billion in stem cell research over 10 years. The investment is projected to generate state revenues and health care cost savings of between \$6.4 billion and \$12.6 billion, according to an economic impact report by the Analysis Group Inc.

Michigan, one of five states in the nation that does not allow the development of new embryonic stem cell lines, is focused on easing legal restrictions. A hearing on three bills will be Oct. 31 before the House Judiciary Committee. The bills aim to allow embryonic stem cell research but increase penalties for human cloning, one of the fears cited by opponents of the research.

Activists are contemplating a ballot initiative to let voters decide in November 2008 if legislative efforts fail.

Business is discouraged

It's important that Michigan change its law not only to move toward finding better treatments and cures of diseases but also to foster a more positive business environment, said James Eliason, vice president for external development for Asterand, a tissue research company in Wayne State University's TechTown.

"The current law gives a negative impression to anybody who would want to move into the state with a high-tech life sciences company," Eliason said.

"Even if they weren't intending to work on stem cells, it can send a negative message about what's the next thing they might want to outlaw."

If Michigan doesn't change its laws, proponents say, other states seeking to expand life science and biotech industries will continue to court Michigan businesses such as BioFlow Industries, a Whitmore Lake start-up firm developing equipment for studying human cells.

Owner Lee Noll recently traveled to North Carolina and later this month is flying to Texas to meet with investors who want him to move his business.

Noll doesn't want to leave Michigan, but he said he might have to because his fledging company needs investors to expand into what he expects will be a \$50 million venture within five years. Few Michigan investors are willing to take the risk.

"Our product can be used for adult stem cell research as well as embryonic stem cell research," said Noll. "The jury is still out as to which of those sources is most beneficial. Because of that we need to test our tool on both."

Universities in states with less restrictive laws on stem cell research have begun courting some of Michigan's brightest scientists.

Among them is Bennett Novitch, who was an assistant professor of cell and developmental biology at the University of Michigan until Sept. 1. He has taken his work on neuron stem cells to University of California-Los Angeles. Novitch's work involves animals, but embryonic stem cells could be involved in the future.

While opponents of embryonic stem cell research point to the potential of adult stem cells, advocates say scientists should study both.

Though adult stem cells have shown great promise, they are limited, scientists say, while embryonic stem cells have nearly endless potential in their ability to reproduce other cells.

"As somebody who performs adult stem cell research every day, if we're serious about curing disease we should be studying both embryonic and adult stem cells," said Sean Morrison, director of U-M's Center for Stem Cell Biology.

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