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Stem cell debate hits House panel

Families, wheelchair users argue for or against state bills that will relax research restrictions.

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LANSING -- Laura Jackson sat in a wheelchair Wednesday before a panel of lawmakers, unable to move her body from the neck down. Across the room, two parents cradled their children, who may have never been born.

The two parties represented both sides of the debate over controversial bills aiming at loosening state restrictions on embryonic stem cell research and increasing penalties for human cloning.

Embryonic stem cells are derived from excess embryos created in fertility clinics.

Proponents say allowing researchers to study the cells, which are thrown away as medical waste, could lead to better treatments and possible cures for those suffering from incurable diseases and injuries. Opponents argue it is immoral to take human life for scientific research.

For Jackson, who favors the research, it represents hope that she might recover from the cheerleading accident that left her a quadriplegic and dependent on a ventilator since she was 14.

"I disagree with those who say embryonic stem cell research is not pro-life," said Jackson, 18, of Livonia. "This research represents the true pro-life position because it could save human lives and eliminate human suffering."

But David and Stacy Giesen, who oppose the research, bore two children, Frank and Lucy, by adopting unused embryos created by another couple in a fertility clinic. Their experience is proof that there is an alternative for the leftover embryos in fertility clinics, they said.

"Do scientists truly believe my Frank could have better served humanity dissected, destroyed and ultimately injected into someone's spine?" said Stacy Giesen of Marshall.

The four-hour hearing before the House Judiciary Committee drew passionate supporters on both sides.

Among them was Edsel Ford II, the great-grandson of Henry Ford. His 15-year-old son, Albert, was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes when he was 5. He now relies on an insulin pump around the clock and pricks his finger six times a day to check the insulin in his blood.

"Embryonic stem cell research is currently one of the greatest hopes in the search for a cure for juvenile diabetes," Ford said. "The only obstacles to this critical research are born out of myth and ignorance."

But Ann Stephenson, who suffers from multiple sclerosis and relies on a wheelchair, said it's immoral.

"There is nothing I want more than to be able to live a normal, functional life," said Stephenson, of Lansing. "But not at the cost of someone else's life."

The committee will take a vote after Thanksgiving to move it to the House floor. It is unclear if supporters will get passed in the Legislature this session. If they don't, proponents may launch a ballot measure and let voters decide.



"This research represents the true pro-life position because it could save human lives," says Laura Jackson, 18, of Livonia. (John Gwillim / Special to The Detroit News)



Edsel Ford II, whose son has juvenile diabetes, expresses support for stem cell research before the House judiciary panel Wednesday. (John Gwillim / Special to The Detroit News)