



Michigan set to lead in stem cell research Scientists at WSU, U-M have their projects ready

BY MEGHA SATYANARAYANA • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • MARCH 10, 2009

At Wayne State University, Carol Brenner and her Tech Town colleagues know that Monday's lifting of federal restrictions on stem cell research means what once was trash could lead to a treasure trove of treatments.

They'll be able to study embryos with genetic mutations for neurological diseases, embryos that once would have been thrown out. "This is the first time we'll be able to look at embryonic stem cells derived from disease," she said.

It's one of many projects set to take off after President Barack Obama lifted the ban on funding research on new stem cell lines. Combined with Michigan voters' decision in November to approve constitutional protection for stem cell research on donated leftover embryos, local scientists say the state is poised to be a leader in the field.

Millions of dollars are slated for an embryonic stem cell consortium at the University of Michigan. And the addition of any money from the National Institutes of Health -- possibly as soon as September -- will open the door for jobs.

"As of today, we can truly use all the resources we have," said Eva Feldman, director of the A. Alfred Taubman Medical Research Institute at U-M. While cautioning against false hope for immediate cures, she will use embryonic stem cells to study Lou Gehrig's disease.

As Obama announced his decision Monday morning, applause erupted at the White House for both the overturned ban and his directive to White House science officials to end an era of political influence on scientific progress and information.

"In recent years," he said, "when it comes to stem cell research, rather than furthering discovery, our government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values."

The Michigan Catholic Conference expressed disappointment in the reversal, noting that a month earlier Obama said, "There is no God who condones taking the life of an innocent human being."

"Unfortunately, there is no consistency between this profound statement and today's executive order -- as destroying human embryos is, in fact, taking the life of an innocent human being," said MCC Vice President for Public Policy Paul Long.

State Sen. Tom George, R-Texas Township and a 2010 gubernatorial candidate, cautioned that if the supply of donated embryos runs out, a market for eggs may develop, requiring abundant oversight.

Michigan businessman Alfred Taubman, a longtime supporter of biomedical and stem cell research, said both the passage of Proposal 2 and the presidential orders will make a huge difference in the state.

"Regenerative medicine, tissue engineering, medication testing, uses we have yet to even dream of. We can expand the number of scientists at Michigan State, U-M, Wayne State and Oakland University," Taubman said. "It makes all the difference in the world."