

The Detroit News

October 16, 2007

Stem cell study gets \$1.4M

Taubman donates to Michigan group and pushes for law changes

KIM KOZLOWSKI

BLOOMFIELD HILLS -- Shopping mall magnate A. Alfred Taubman has thrown his support behind controversial efforts to relax Michigan's embryonic stem cell laws with a \$1.4 million donation and a pledge to be a major financial supporter, should a ballot campaign go forward.

Taubman told The Detroit News on Monday that he gave \$1.4 million to Michigan Stem Cell Research & Cures, a group working since 2006 to educate the public about embryonic stem cell's basic science, potential and Michigan's current laws essentially banning research.

He hopes lawmakers will ease state laws through legislative efforts under way. But if lawmakers fail to pass the legislation, embryonic stem cell research supporters are exploring whether to ask voters in November 2008 if the law should be changed. Documents were filed this month with the state to set up a ballot campaign committee.

A philanthropist for many medical causes, Taubman said he would also help fund a ballot campaign but stopped short of specifying how much he's willing to give.

"I've known people who I've seen die," Taubman said.

"Had embryonic stem cell research been around, I believe they'd be alive today."

Opponents of embryonic stem cell research, including the Michigan Catholic Conference and Right to Life of Michigan, say the research destroys human embryos and could lead to cloning.

But proponents say embryonic stem cells are already being thrown away as medical waste, yet they hold the promise of unlocking better treatments or cures for juvenile diabetes, dementia and other debilitating diseases.

They also say Michigan's laws are driving prominent researchers -- and their funding -- away from Michigan.

Taubman, who has donated \$150 million over his lifetime, including \$60 million to the University of Michigan, recently gave \$5 million to Eva Feldman, a prominent U-M researcher of Lou Gehrig's disease. She is researching whether stem cells can counteract the destruction of nerve cells in some patients. She is using rats genetically altered with a gene present in many Lou Gehrig's patients

But because of the laws in Michigan, Feldman had to take Taubman's gift and team up with a researcher in California, a state that has invested millions in embryonic stem cell research. She and Martin Marsala, an associate professor at the University of California-San Diego School of Medicine, could begin clinical trials in five years if they are successful in counteracting nerve cell destruction in Lou Gehrig's patients with stem cells.

Feldman, however, said it would be easier if she could do the research in Michigan.

"It would simplify our work and keep important resources in Michigan," Feldman said.

Annual budget doubled

The \$1.4 million given to Michigan Stem Cell Research & Cures doubled its annual \$700,000 budget. It will use the money to expand its educational efforts by training people across the state on the issue so they can have a network of ambassadors educating the public about embryonic stem cell research.

"It's a tremendous vote of confidence," said Marcia Baum, executive director of Michigan Stem Cell Research & Cures.

Taubman's support adds him to the growing list of high-profile Michiganders supporting embryonic stem cell research. Bipartisan supporters include Gov. Jennifer Granholm, Democratic U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, former Republican U.S. Rep. John "Joe" Schwarz, former Blue Cross/Blue Shield CEO Richard Whitmer and Richard McLellan, a strong anti-abortion advocate and personal attorney for former Gov. John Engler. "All we're interested in is how to cure people and give people a chance to live without suffering," Taubman said.