

The Detroit News

October 30, 2008

Is embryonic stem cell research right for Mich? Tuskegee experiment led to existing laws and standards to prevent abuse

Judge Damon Keith

I write this in support of Proposition 2 because my wife, who passed away a year and a half ago, was a physician interested in embryonic stem cell research. To further that research, our family has set up a scholarship fund in the name of Dr. Rachel Boone Keith at the Boston University Medical School, where she graduated.

The vast majority of doctors and medical experts tell us that embryonic stem cell research has virtually limitless potential for medical discovery. It can unlock the secrets of a host of diseases: cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's and more. Eventually, most agree, it will lead to new treatments and cures.

The opponents of Proposal 2 allege that stem cell research would lead to a repeat of the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment in which 399 poor African-American men were intentionally left untreated for the disease from 1932 to 1972. When I reviewed the law to see how such an outrage could happen, I was astonished to learn that existing laws did not prohibit such egregious conduct.

Soon afterward, doctors, lawyers and legislators made a concerted effort to ensure it would never happen again. The result was a tightly constructed network of laws, professional standards and procedures that ensure that nothing like Tuskegee will ever be repeated.

As a new technology, embryonic stem cell research is the most tightly regulated medical research there is. Federal law regulates human subject research, including all research that involves the donation of embryos for the derivation of stem cells and any possible clinical testing on patients. Furthermore, absolutely nothing in Proposal 2 would prohibit Michigan or the federal government from enacting additional regulations or ethical standards.

The same is true for other diseases. We know that hypertension, diabetes and other ailments are suffered disproportionately more by African-Americans. Other diseases, like sickle cell anemia, are far more prevalent among African-Americans.

These are diseases that embryonic stem cell research might one day help treat. Yet scientists believe that African-Americans are likely under-represented among available embryonic stem cell lines. To address this social justice issue, it will be important for scientists to derive new embryonic stem cell lines from African-American backgrounds.

In my lifetime, I have witnessed medical feats that I never would have dreamed of. Within the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren, embryonic stem cell research has the promise to provide the next medical

miracle. It is our responsibility that African-Americans and all Americans are part of this research. Let's not close this door to important research.

Damon Keith is a senior judge on the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals who lives in Detroit.