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Shameless anti-stem cell ad

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Shame is typically a casualty of a desperate campaign.

But opponents to Proposal 2, the Nov. 4 ballot initiative that would legalize embryonic stem cell research in Michigan, may have set new standards for shameless fear-mongering.

Their ads, running in heavy rotation on television in the Detroit area, have mostly invoked hyperbolic absurdities designed to make stem cell research look like some sort of Frankenstein-inspired quackery. It has really been something to watch, almost from the beginning.

The editorial page of the Free Press has mostly ignored the anti-Prop 2 campaign, and written about the issue just [once](#), to endorse passage of the proposal.

But this week, the opponents went even further, and embraced a horribly offensive, race-baiting comparison that cannot escape comment.

An ad titled "In the Name of Good," (See it [here](#).) which began running today, compares the research that Prop 2 would allow to the human experimentation horrors at Tuskegee University. Using an actor whose voice "sounds" black, the commercial says (quite falsely) that stem cell research won't be regulated, and implies that it could therefore lead to abuses similar to the Tuskegee experiments, in which hundreds of African-American men were purposely infected with syphilis by researchers.

The point is clear: to frighten minority communities into voting against Prop 2 by drawing a false connection with past abuse.

It's far past shameless, and well into reckless and even pernicious campaigning.

For the record, the comparison couldn't be more factually absurd.

Tuskegee was an awful tragedy, a government study that went on for decades without participants knowing what was being done to them.

But it spurred massive reform, and was directly responsible for much of the regulation that now governs all human research, including any stem cell research that would be conducted should Prop 2 pass. Those regulations begin with the Institutional Review Board process, which is administered by the Food and Drug Administration as well as the Department of Health and Human Services. And they stretch further to the stringent rules enforced by the National

Academy of Sciences and the International Society for Stem Cell Research.

It is simply a lie to suggest any threat that stem cell research might repeat the horrors of Tuskegee.

Beyond that, though, it's a cardinal example of irresponsible campaigning to prey on the distrust minority communities already harbor for medical research just to win at the ballot box.

That distrust is one of the primary hurdles to getting enough black organ donors, research participants, even blood donors. What does it say about the anti-Prop 2 folks that they're willing to exacerbate that problem - which should be of major concern to anyone who values life - in order to stop stem cell research?

It certainly makes you wonder who's funding this campaign. We won't know until finance reports are due later this month, and even then it may be difficult to unmask the parties behind the organizations that are likely giving money.

But it's worth pursuing, if only to restore of sense of shame to some advocates who have long left that behind.

Editor's note: This blog post should have recounted that the subjects of the Tuskegee experimentation were left untreated after being diagnosed with syphilis, not that they were deliberately infected with syphilis.