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Stem cell trial offers hope for patients with spinal cord injuries

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

Detroit - A provocative video of two rodents with spinal cord injuries was shown to an audience gathered Tuesday at the Detroit Marriot for the second day of the World Stem Cell Summit.

One of the rodents dragged its left hind leg, suffered from incontinence and couldn't stand. The other rodent had an injection of embryonic stem cells and appeared to have more mobility in its back legs.

The video was aimed at showing hope for the world's first clinical trial using embryonic stem cells in humans. California-based Geron Corp. company has received approval from the Food and Drug Administration to inject the stem cells into the spines of patients with spinal cord injuries, initially to determine safety.

"While the animal is not normal, there is some return of the muscles," said Thomas Okarma, Geron president and chief executive officer.

The research offers hope for those who have sustained a spinal cord injury, which leads to paralysis. Depending on the location of the injury, people with spinal cord injuries lose the use of their legs, and sometimes the loss of mobility in their arms, hands and even their ability to breathe.

Sabrina Cohen of Miami Beach lost the use of her legs and hands following a car accident in 1992.

"The first stage of the trial is to prove safety; that's huge," said Cohen, 32, said before the presentation. "And I hope it will be an effective treatment for injured individuals."