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Stem cell advocate visits area

BY JENNY LANCOUR

ESCANABA — In an effort to educate people about stem cells research, speakers from Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures are canvassing the state. One such speaker addressed the Escanaba Noon Kiwanis Club Monday.

“I find that when people understand the facts, they are open to talk about the science and how it fits into their own culture,” said Marcia Baum, executive director of the statewide group. She’s one of 50 speakers trained to speak about stem cell research to groups such as service clubs and faith organizations.

Baum said she was asked by U.S. Sen. Carl Levin and Congressman Joe Schwartz two years ago to put together a nonprofit and nonpartisan group to educate people in the state about stem cell research. The group is funded entirely through donations, she said.

The purpose of the educational program is to bring information to people so they can form an informed opinion regarding stem cell research, Baum said.

Since its beginning, re-search on embryonic stem cells has been controversial, according to the group’s brochure. Some believe it’s unethical to use living cells for research if the embryos are destroyed.

Others believe it’s unethical to not use them for research on life-saving cures and treatments.

In her presentation, Baum addressed three topics: stem cell research; treatments or cures related to stem cell research; and laws that control such research.

Stem cells are the beginning of each tissue in the body, she explained. Stem cells repair the body when it is diseased or injured. There are two types of stem cells — adult and embryonic.

Adult stem cells are found in blood, bone, skin and the umbilical cord. For the past four decades adult stem cells have been studied and grown in a laboratory. They have been used to treat cancers and other diseases like leukemia, Baum said. But the types of tissue provided by these cells are limiting, she said.

On the other hand, embryonic stem cells form all the cells in the body and can become many types of tissue based on research that began in 1998.

“Scientists hope to make them a specialized cell to treat disease or injury,” Baum said, adding future research is expected to treat macular degeneration, juvenile diabetes and paralysis. Progress has already been made with heart disease and Alzheimers.

Though there are no federal laws against stem cell research and using leftover cells from fertility clinics, government funding is limited to paying for research on cells leftover from 2001, Baum said.

In 2006 and 2007, both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives passed bi-partisan legislation seeking funding for embryonic stem cell research. The two presidential candidates — Barack Obama and John McCain — are on record supporting such research, she said.

Michigan is among five states which have laws regarding embryonic stem cell research. A Michigan law in 1978 prevents couples from donating embryos, leftover at fertility clinics, for stem cell research.



Marcia Baum, executive director of Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures, addresses the Escanaba Noon Kiwanis Monday. Baum gave a presentation on stem cell research and laws.