

Stem Cell Sunshine

Finally, legislators prepare to open debate on easing limits on research

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It is about time. After Republican leadership in Lansing stalled a bill to ease Michigan's ban on embryonic stem cell research, Rep. Ed Gaffney, R-Grosse Pointe Farms, has promised a hearing on the subject by April 1.

"We shouldn't sweep controversial issues under the rug," Gaffney told the Free Press this week. "They should be out there, both sides, so we can talk intelligently about it."

Gaffney appears to understand that the job of a legislator is to debate and weigh complicated public policy issues, even if the subjects generate political discomfort. In this case, a public airing is crucial because opponents have spread so much misinformation about potentially life-saving research.

Embryonic stem cell research doesn't kill anybody. Scientists want to use blastocysts -- three days old, devoid of brain waves, smaller than the period at the end of this sentence -- that fertility clinics would otherwise discard.

These cells are thought to be a treasure trove for unlocking diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's because of their regenerative prowess and their ability to be used in a variety of health areas.

Although critics, such as Right to Life of Michigan, like to say adult cells have a better track record, those cells are limited in their use. Adult blood stem cells can only produce blood, and neural cells can only be used to help the nervous system, and so on, most scientists think. Because embryonic cells are not mature, they have the ability to adapt into any type of cell to fight any type of disease.

Critics say embryonic cells are unproven, but scientists have been prevented from proving anything because of bans such as that imposed in Michigan and President George W. Bush's withdrawal of federal funding for research using anything but existing cell lines.

Those existing lines, by the way, have been contaminated with mice cells and could never be used for human treatment. While the University of Michigan is doing research on these lines, who is to say what cures embryonic cells could unleash if these and other of the nation's greatest minds could study them?

Gaffney says he's not sold on embryonic cell research, he's just open to learning about it. That's more than Lansing has been willing to do for the year and a half that the bill sponsored by Rep. Andy Meisner, D-Ferndale, has languished.

"Maybe we're not ready for it yet," Gaffney said. "Let's throw some sunshine on the subject, let's see what testimony says. We respect our universities; let's see what the medical schools have to say. We're pumping all kinds of money into them, we might as well listen to what the research has to offer and what state of the art is right now."

That state of the art could not only get Michigan on the path to helping more people, it could also diversify and boost the economy. While the life sciences and biotech industries are doing well here, they would surely thrive with more vigor if a whole new avenue of research -- that which health professionals say holds the most promise -- is opened up.

There's no moral victory in preserving embryos that could never be implanted or "adopted" at the expense of actual human beings fighting for their lives. Let's at least talk about letting medical science do its job and search for cures.

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