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Free Press Editorial Board

End the stem cell ban

It will be a good thing if Michiganders can vote in November to end the state's troglodytic ban on stem cell research.

A group called CureMichigan submitted 570,000 signatures Monday to put such a proposal on the ballot. That's about 200,000 more than needed, so let the campaign begin.

The ban puts Michigan at a decisive competitive disadvantage with states that permit embryonic stem cell research; firms that want to do stem cell research just have another reason to stay away from here, and our universities have a harder time attracting and retaining top researchers. And it doesn't save "life," as some of its proponents have long argued. The embryos subject to research are generally extras leftover from couples involved in artificial insemination; clinics usually discard them anyway.

But the biggest reason the ban makes no sense is more principled than practical. The ban is about allowing moral and religious objections to restrict public and scientific policy about an area of exciting and promising discovery, rather than letting science take the lead in figuring out what works, and why.

The danger there is manifest. No one's saying morality ought not guide scientific exploration, or set important guardrails against abuse or, in rare cases, evil.

But in this case, the moralizing has gone much further. It has taken a minority view - one that equates embryos with viable human life - and used it to preclude an entire realm of research that could yield far-reaching benefits for humanity. That's just awful policy-making.

Last year, another scientific breakthrough with mature cells, rather than stem cells, suggested that they might be used as readily to cure disease as stem cells, giving new voice to those who oppose stem cell research in Michigan.

But Dr. Robert Kelch, executive vice president for medical affairs at the University of Michigan and CEO of U-M Health System, wrote in the Free Press that "several problems need to be overcome" before such cells become useful for new disease treatments.

"Scientists need to show that the cells are stable over time," he said. "

They need to learn whether the new type of stem cell really possesses the powerful traits of embryonic stem cells, which can become any type of cell in the body. Scientists also need to find different ways to reprogram the human skin cells to become stem cells ... At this early stage in

stem cell exploration, it makes no sense to abandon any avenue of research, especially if that would delay the life-changing therapies for which people are waiting.”

Here again, the debate ought to be shaped by science - to fully explore both paths to see which is superior - rather than solely by the moral view that stem cell research is somehow unacceptable.

Michigan should join the scientific 21st century, and leave the stem cell ban behind.