



Everything Michigan



Coalition pushes state to ease stem cell limits

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Many nights, Cathy Coury awakens, worrying her two young sons could slip into diabetic shock.

"It never leaves my mind, 24 hours a day, seven days a week," she said. "You feel like you're walking this tightrope all the time."

Both boys -- Gabriel, 12, and Nicholas, 8 -- could be freed from the insulin pumps that keep them alive, Coury believes, if Michigan law were changed, allowing researchers to use embryonic stem cells in their search for a cure.

That's why the Caledonia woman joined a coalition of scientists, politicians, parents and business and university representatives called Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures, urging state lawmakers to remove restrictions on embryonic stem cell research. The bipartisan, nonprofit group made its case for the first time Monday in Lansing.

"Michigan has significant assets invested in universities and firms, and we don't want these assets to be squandered," Democratic U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, of Detroit, said at a press conference that also included Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz, of Battle Creek.

Warning that Western, Wayne State and Michigan State universities, as well as the University of Michigan, could suffer as a result of Michigan's policies, Schwarz cautioned against "creating barriers at our state lines."

He said states such as California, New York and New Jersey were running away with the economic prize offered by the nascent life sciences industry.

The new group plans to educate the public about stem-cell research in forums throughout the state in coming months.

The group itself is devoted to education. But backers hope the public will lean on the Republican-controlled Legislature, which is resisting bills sponsored by Rep. Andrew Meisner, D-Ferndale, to ease prohibitions on stem-cell research that are among the most restrictive in the nation.

The process of extracting stem cells from an embryo destroys it, and Michigan law forbids research that harms an embryo.

Defenders of Michigan's law, including the Michigan Catholic Conference and Right to Life of Michigan, say the sanctity of human life is at stake.

"You don't sacrifice one human life to save another," said Dave Maluchnik, of the Catholic conference. "We must search for ethical ways to help those who are suffering from debilitating diseases," including research using adult stem cells.

He pointed to GOP-sponsored bills establishing a statewide network of umbilical-cord-blood stem cell banks that he said would not only promote medical cures but also boost the economy. Cord blood and bone marrow are key sources of adult stem cells. One of the bills would fund the effort with \$5 million from the 21st Century Jobs Fund.

Earlier this month, the state awarded \$45.7 million from the fund to 25 life sciences companies to help create jobs in the emerging industry.

How effective adult stem cells are in curing disease is up for debate. And backers of embryonic stem cell research believe all known tools should be used.

"You can't stand where I stand without feeling a sense of urgency" to find cures and treatments for diseases such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease and cancer, said Sean Morrison, director of the U-M Center for Stem Cell Biology.

Coury, who volunteers as legislative chairwoman of the West Michigan chapter of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, attended Monday's press conference, although she had spent much of Sunday night trying to bring her youngest son's blood glucose level under control.

"Some days are better than others," she said.

The older son, Gabriel, was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes -- also known as type one diabetes -- when he was 4 years old. His younger brother, Nicholas, was diagnosed with the same disease when he was 15 months old. Since neither boy's pancreas is able to produce insulin to convert sugar into energy, each wears an insulin pump that provides the hormone through a tube inserted in the abdomen.

"They won't live a day without it," Coury said, but added: "I don't have a doubt they will see a cure in their lifetime. There's research going on for diabetes along many different avenues."

One of the most promising, she believes, involves embryos discarded by fertility clinics. Coury is aware of the moral issues surrounding embryonic stem cell research and opposition from groups like Right to Life.

"I wrestled with that," she said, "but when you look at the facts, these are embryos that already were

created, and they're going to be thrown in the trash. It's almost akin to organ donations."

While some promote embryonic stem cell research as an economic boon to Michigan's medical research corridor, Coury sees it in more personal terms.

"It's the future of my children," she said.

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