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Editorial: Don't undermine voters on stem cells

BY THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS EDITORIAL BOARD

Michigan should be reinventing itself, but that's impossible when state leaders keep fighting old battles.

Pending legislation that would undermine stem cell research is a prime example.

Last year, Michigan voters backed Proposal 2 and its aims of saving lives and curing diseases. The successful ballot initiative changed the state Constitution to allow research using stem cells from human embryos that are destined for destruction, because they are unsuitable for implantation or no longer needed.

The November 2008 victory was convincing: 2.5 million people voted "yes" and prevailed by a 53 percent to 47 percent margin.

Lawmakers should honor that result, and defeat bills pending in Lansing that would thwart the will of Michigan voters and undermine confidence in government.

Research directors at the state's big three universities — University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Wayne State University — say Proposal 2 is working as intended. They criticize the pending bills as unnecessary, and worse, deliberately designed to foil research through regulatory roadblocks.

A leading Proposal 2 opponent, Sen. Tom George, R-Kalamazoo, convened Health Policy Committee hearings on these regulatory bills, which are supported by Right to Life and co-sponsored by West Michigan Republican Sens. Bill Hardiman of Kentwood, Wayne Kuipers of Holland and Mark Jansen of Gaines Township.

Supporters of the bills say they are trying to clarify Proposal 2. But it's clear the measures go far beyond that. The best example: a proposed requirement that invitro fertilization facilities create annual reports detailing exactly how many embryos were created, implanted and donated for research. Such a rule has little to do with stem cell research regulation and could actually discourage people from using clinics.

One U-M researcher, Sean Morrison, asked why committee members were "spending so much time trying to put stem cell biologists in jail," referring to proposed fines and penalties, including a five-year felony for anyone who attempted to create a human embryo for non-therapeutic research purposes.

Proposal 2 backers promised economic benefits if the measure passed. That is proving true, with U-M already winning nearly \$7 million in federal stimulus research grants. And next October in Detroit, more than 1,200 top stem cell researchers from 30 countries will attend a major conference at the Renaissance Center. The conference aims to further research cures for spinal cord injuries and diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and juvenile diabetes. Those goals are why many Michigan voters supported Proposal 2.

Those who argued against Proposal 2 — including a Press editorial counseling against changing the Constitution — had a full and fair chance before the election to sway voters and weren't successful.

Proposal 2's language anticipated post-election regulation attempts. The amendment "prohibits state and local laws that prevent, restrict or discourage stem cell research, future therapies and cures."

Lawmakers shouldn't undermine voter intent by pursuing this package of bills. The voters have spoken. It's time for Michigan to move on.

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