



November 8, 2007

Chronic disease cures await ease in embryonic stem cell research

My first appearance in this newspaper was about 10 years ago, when I was a 13-year-old Livonia Observer carrier who wanted to raise awareness about diabetes. I was curious about the Internet, so I followed the old advice "write what you know" and started a Web site for families who had children with Type 1 diabetes. As the Web site grew in popularity, I began to receive a significant amount of attention as well. The attention was encouraging, and it soon motivated me to become an advocate for diabetes research.

I began speaking publicly about my life with diabetes, and twice had the opportunity to visit Washington, D.C., with the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation to advocate for diabetes research funding, including testifying before a Senate subcommittee in 1999. These experiences taught me a lot about politics, advocacy, and the world, as I realized for the first time that there are people who strongly oppose the research that will cure me of this chronic disease.

The message I brought to my legislators in Washington, as with my fellow advocates for diabetes research, was a simple one: Promise to remember me. If legislators put the names, faces, and stories of real constituents to the issue of diabetes research, how could they possibly oppose funding such research?

Unfortunately, some legislators are confusing their personal religious views with their duty to do what is right for their constituents and continue to vote against funding embryonic stem cell research despite the overwhelming support for it across the country.

In Michigan, the situation is even more severe, as the state has some of the harshest, most restrictive laws about such research. These laws are out of date and severely impact Michigan's competitiveness in growing fields of industry. As such, there is a major effort to change the laws governing embryonic stem cell research in Michigan to allow for research to occur while strongly protecting against fears of cloning.

State Rep. John Pastor, who represents most of Livonia, still opposes embryonic stem cell research, despite the fact that according to his own staff he has been "inundated with calls" of support for the research. Rep. Pastor defends this position by saying he is "pro-life," but how can one be "pro-life" when they oppose research that has the potential to save millions of lives?

The truth is that Rep. Pastor supports the "life" of frozen cells which will otherwise be thrown in the garbage at fertility clinics, and not the lives of the millions of people, including thousands of Livonia residents, who would benefit from the treatments and cures that will emerge from stem cell research.

The other line of defense that Rep. Pastor and others who oppose embryonic stem cell research use is that they support "other" kinds of stem cell research, such as that on adult stem cells, and thus embryonic stem cell research should not be funded. This argument is just silly, as almost nobody opposes these other kinds of research and scientists agree that embryonic stem cells hold far greater promise for treating chronic diseases such as diabetes.

The need for a cure to diabetes has never been more urgent. Over 21 million Americans have diabetes, and one in three Americans born in 2000 will develop some form of the disease in their lifetime. The costs of diabetes to the U.S. economy are enormous, estimated at \$132 billion each year in terms of disability, work loss, and premature mortality. In 2002, the nation spent \$13,243 on every person with diabetes, compared to only \$2,650 on every person without diabetes.

Given the number of people who would benefit from this research, the boost it would be to the state's economy, and the national savings that would result from developing new treatments and cures, it is inexcusable that Rep. Pastor opposes it.

Perhaps the problem is that Rep. Pastor just doesn't understand what life is like with a disease such as diabetes. Certainly if he or one of his children was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, he would change his mind and support embryonic stem cell research, for who would vote against curing a disease they or a loved one has? I would never wish for someone else to have diabetes, so instead I ask that Livonia residents who have been affected by the disease and wish to see it cured call Rep. Pastor at (517) 373-3920 and tell him what it is like to live with it while waiting for a cure and why embryonic stem cell research should be supported in Michigan.

Ryan M. Dinkgrave is a Livonia resident, He works for a nonprofit organization and is a graduate student at Michigan State University, where he's also a contributing columnist to The State News.