

October 07, 2007

## Let couples help stem-cell research

EDITORIAL

Today, Michigan's Catholic parishes are educating their members about stem-cell research. The church also is sending DVDs and other material to more than 500,000 homes encouraging Catholics to support research on adult stem cells but reject the use of stem cells taken from embryos.

It's a nuanced and honorable stance grounded in faith. It's also one we question. Embryonic stem cells appear to have great potential for research and to combat many diseases. State lawmakers have discussed allowing couples to donate their unused embryos from in-vitro fertilization — embryos that would otherwise be destroyed — for such research. We see no reason not to do that if it might help save lives.

The distinction between research on adult and embryonic stem cells is subtle but important. Both are nurtured in labs. Both are grown for research and, potentially, to generate cells and tissues that could treat those who suffer from Alzheimer's disease, spinal injuries, even burns. Both hold tremendous promise to save lives, and that's why stem-cell research has drawn such attention.

Adult cells, however, are more difficult to grow and are limited in what types of cells they can become. Adult stem cells drawn from blood can grow only into blood cells. Embryonic cells are prized for their "plasticity" — their ability to become nerve or muscle tissue or whatever else — and how easily they grow. There are challenges to transplant them into people, but their value for scientific research is significant.

The real issue is one of conscience. Leaders of the Catholic Church and other faiths compare the destruction of an embryo to the taking of a life. That relies on one's belief that even the tiniest creation — a few cells, really — deserves protection. It's fair, too, to raise a broader question of morality: If one is willing to sacrifice a few cells, where will we all draw the line? Is society stepping down a slippery slope?

However, the reality is that these embryonic cells don't feel, suffer or have even the faintest consciousness. And most fertility clinics destroy unused embryos, an accepted practice. Why, then, not put them to use for potentially life-saving research?

The fruits of this research could change millions of lives. It could offer treatment for people suffering from the most common afflictions — diabetes, arthritis, heart disease, Alzheimer's. Breakthroughs may be years away, but the fact that we're able to talk about them is a powerful reason to promote their use.

State lawmakers haven't considered spending public dollars for stem-cell work — as California's voters did two years ago — but lawmakers are talking about giving couples the chance to contribute to it. It would be their decision. The couples could turn over their unused embryos that would be destroyed, anyway.

That is a very limited use of embryonic stem cells, and we think it makes sense.