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Future of stem-cell research discussed

BY CHAD LIVENGOOD

A scientific breakthrough announced Wednesday provides hope for curing hereditary diseases, say advocates of a statewide ballot initiative to loosen restrictions on embryonic-stem-cell research.

"The news today shows there's hope for treating illnesses of all sorts," Gary Dunbar, a neuroscience professor at Central Michigan University, said during a panel discussion attended by 120 people at Albion College Wednesday night.

Earlier in the day, a group of California scientists reported they were able to control diabetes in mice by using human embryonic stem cells, raising the possibility that such cells could help treat the disease in people.

Albion College's Ford Institute for Public Policy and Science and Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures hosted the forum. The panel consisted of four embryonic-stem-cell research advocates who want excess embryos from fertilization clinics used for research, rather than discarded.

Former U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz, a doctor and advocate for embryonic-stem-cell research, spoke about federal legislation that would lift President Bush's ban on expanding current research. Current research is limited to stem-cell lines derived before August 2001, and scientists say many of them are contaminated and no longer useful, Schwarz said.

Schwarz predicted the next president -- be it Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton or the candidate he supports, John McCain -- would lift Bush's 2001 ban by March 2009.

Schwarz, of Battle Creek, is co-chairman of a bipartisan, statewide ballot-proposal committee seeking to loosen restrictions so Michigan universities and private firms can conduct embryonic research.

"The only way to settle the issue is to put it on the ballot and let the people decide," Schwarz said.

Schwarz called opposition to stem-cell research by Right to Life and the Roman Catholic Church "stunningly disingenuous."

"The opposition has raised disingenuousness to an art form," said Schwarz, who describes himself as a "Mass-attending Catholic."

When Rives Junction resident Beth Thorrez tried to raise the issue of cloning with Schwarz, he shot back: "No one wants to clone anything."

"The presentation was filled with lies," said Thorrez, 45, a Catholic who opposes stem-cell research.

Jackson resident Steve Kwaske, 49, agreed. "In laymen's terms, it's still cloning," he said of using embryonic stem cells for research.

Kwaske, a board member of Michigan Right to Life, said scientists advocating embryonic research have reduced human life to "instrumental value," instead of the "intrinsic value" of life he values as a Catholic.