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Will new stem cell discovery end ethical debate?

EDITORIAL

Is it possible that after years of political wrangling a scientific breakthrough could render the whole argument over embryonic stem cell research moot?

If the discovery of how to turn skin cells into stem cells bears worthwhile fruit and human cures, is it possible that in this age of the politicization of science, at least one topic will no longer be fought over by religious conservatives and the scientific community?

We hope so.

But, for the time being, we also hope public policymakers don't rush to declare this new technique a success and slam the door on embryonic stem cell research.

Despite claims by one camp or another about the efficacy of one type of stem cell over another, the truth is that stem cell research is only beginning. It's not yet known whether embryonic stem cells or umbilical cord stem cells or adult stem cells will be superior to cure a wide variety of human illnesses.

For that reason, and for the sake of national and state competitiveness, we'd like to leave all avenues open until it becomes clear where the most effective therapies come from.

After a ban on federal funding for research on all but a handful of embryonic stem cell lines, research on embryonic stem cells has slowed in the United States while it has exploded in Asia.

Meanwhile, the Michigan Legislature has placed even tougher restrictions on embryonic stem cell research.

“The law in Michigan puts us at such a disadvantage in embryonic stem cell research that people in that area don't even apply for jobs here,” said Sean Morrison, director of the University of Michigan Center for Stem Cell Biology, quoted last week in the Kalamazoo Gazette and The Grand Rapids Press. “While there are other states that are literally investing billions in this, we are literally threatening to put people in jail for this.”

A 1998 law makes it a crime -- with penalties of up to \$10 million in fines and 10 years in prison -- to perform therapeutic cloning.

State Rep. Andy Meisner, D-Ferndale, introduced a bill in April that would overturn Michigan's restrictive embryonic stem cell law.

Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures hopes to put the issue on the November 2008 ballot in Michigan.

We hope this effort to repeal Michigan's law won't cease because of the good news about stem cells from skin.

But we'd be delighted if this new discovery proved to be the superior technique.

Americans would still be able to fight about evolution vs. creationism, contraception vs. abstinence and climate change caused either by human activity or not.

But at least we wouldn't be beating each other up over stem cells. We'd be working together to find cures.