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Marcia Baum: Michigan can't sit out research on stem cells

Scientists announced June 6 what they believe is a promising breakthrough in stem cell research. Using mouse adult stem cells, they successfully manipulated cell genes to create pluripotent cells - cells capable of turning into any other mouse body parts, cells that had previously only been able to be made from mouse embryos.

The next day, the U.S. House voted 247-176 to ease restrictions on human embryonic stem cell research. President Bush just vetoed the bill, as he did similar legislation in 2006.

The reason for the overwhelming, bipartisan House vote: After extensive consideration, Congress decided scientists should have the ability to do all forms of stem cell research to see which will provide the best possible therapies for disease and disabilities. Now, embryonic stem cell research opponents argue that because of the apparent advancement in mice research, all human embryonic stem cell research should halt.

Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures believes this position is short-sighted and premature.

Life sciences research has the potential to produce great new medical treatments as well as bring an economic windfall to states that promote this technology, thereby creating good-paying jobs as well as cures. Midwest states such as Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa are not halting their embryonic stem cell research, and neither are leaders like California and Connecticut. They are pressing ahead with all forms of stem cell research, hoping their scientists make discoveries to improve lives and combat chronic diseases and injuries. Indeed, Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures believes Michigan should redouble its efforts to ease restrictions that criminalize research now done in many other states, particularly on embryos currently being discarded by in vitro fertilization clinics. Regulation stifling innovation is not in the interest of Michigan, particularly as our businesses that want to pursue all forms of stem cell research are being lured from Michigan by states like North Carolina, Texas, California and more.

University of Michigan stem cell researcher Dr. Sean Morrison calls the scientists' new finding "exciting." But he and other experts emphasize that:

- Mice are not humans. It is not clear this would work with human cells.
- Stability of the new cell lines created with the reprogrammed adult mice cells is unproven. These cells could turn into cancer cells.
- We have taken many steps already with human embryonic stem cells - in fact tests aimed at overcoming spinal injuries and treating some forms of diabetes are slated to start soon. It is senseless to delay this research while waiting to see if the mouse stem cell discovery is really the breakthrough some are now predicting.

Congress had it right by voting to allow researchers to use all the tools they ethically can to develop stem cell therapies that may lead to cures for Parkinson's disease, juvenile diabetes, spinal cord injuries, Alzheimer's disease, and many more, possibly even cancer. Michigan should do the same.

Marcia Baum is executive director of Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures (www.stemcellresearchformichigan.com).