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Stem cell research excites colleges U-M, Wayne set to begin; MSU studies legal implications

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Scientists at two of the state's three big research universities, the University of Michigan and Wayne State University, say that, with the passage of Proposal 2, they expect to expand their work on human embryonic stem cells in coming months.

At the third, Michigan State University, such research might take a bit longer to arrive.

"Like any university, we always try to recruit the best faculty we can, and the growth of biomedical research is a key area for Michigan State University," said Ian Gray, MSU's vice president for research and graduate studies. "But before we do that, there are several things we've got to do internally."

MSU officials are looking into the legal implications of the measure, Gray said. They have asked an advisory committee on the ethics of genetic science to begin discussions on the social and ethic issues involved in such research.

And they need to look over MSU's "faculty roster," he said. But to his knowledge, no MSU researchers are pursuing embryonic stem cell research or have immediate plans to do so.

"I, as an academic, feel that embryonic stem cell research should be done," said James Trosko, an MSU professor of pediatrics and human development who, along with colleagues, isolated the first human adult kidney stem cells in 1987, "but I'm not the person who's going to do it."

Proposal 2, which was approved 53 percent to 47 percent by Michigan voters last month, will amend the state's constitution to allow researchers to make embryonic stem cell lines from embryos created, but not used, for fertility treatments and later donated by families.

"The day after the election, the university started getting **phone calls** from patients who wanted to donate embryos that could no longer be used," said Sean Morrison, director of U of M's Center for Stem Cell Biology.

The university isn't accepting such donations yet. Internal oversight groups still need to approve the first round of research proposals, Morrison said.

But he expected that such approvals would be done before spring and was optimistic about the progress that would follow.

"I hope that, in a year's time, we'll have some research programs in place that will have a chance of changing the way people think about the embryonic stem cell program," Morrison said.

And, in two year's time, assuming that President-elect Barack Obama loosens current regulations that severely limit federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, he expects "there will be millions of dollars of new funding from the federal government or from private foundations flowing into Michigan to support this work."

Carol Brenner's research group at Wayne State focuses now on monkey embryonic stem cells, on looking for markers that will tell them which stem cells will be the most useful therapeutically.

With the passage of Proposal 2, the group has the chance to translate some of its findings to human embryonic stem cells, said Brenner, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology.

Though there are still a number of details to work out, she already has begun discussing collaborations with researchers in California and Massachusetts, where embryonic stem cell research is legal and funded, in part, by the states.

"It's exciting," she said. "We're in this, 'I don't know what I should do first' phase. I'm able now to think a little more out of the box."