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Lawmakers should back ethical stem cell research

Michigan should create middle ground on issue

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A long overdue coalition designed to educate Michiganians on the merits of stem cell research kicked off its work this week -- a welcome development on a topic that's too often seen in black and white terms.

Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures aims to facilitate a needed conversation about the nuances of stem cell research -- and its health and economic benefits -- in a state that has some of the most scientifically backward and restrictive laws in the country.

Stem cell research offers the potential of medical advances in fighting deadly diseases, yet Michigan's Legislature has thwarted that potential due to pressure by pro-life activists. The public debate has been painted in overly simplistic terms.

Michigan can find a better way -- and the citizens' group can play a vital part in building awareness and consensus around this issue.

Already dozens of volunteers have signed up for the coalition's "action teams" to speak to civic groups. Many are from juvenile diabetes, breast cancer and other groups that are passionate about stem cell research's potential to help them, coalition Executive Director Marica Baum says.

State legislators should do what's best for them -- and best for Michigan -- and change state law, which makes it a felony to conduct embryonic stem cell research, and instead align Michigan's policy more closely with federal policy.

Through ethical legislation, there's a way to respect life -- and respect life that has already been created. At fertility clinics such as the University of Michigan, thousands of unused embryos left over from the in-vitro fertilization process are thrown away every year. In the process, the hopes of people struggling with life-threatening illnesses such as Parkinson's are dashed, too.

Any new legislation should continue to ban the creation of embryos solely for research purposes. However, scientists should be allowed to use frozen embryos left over from in-vitro fertilization, and only those that would have been discarded anyway.

Second, new legislation should ban all forms of human cloning.

Michigan's economic health is at stake, too. More than \$2 billion is invested in life sciences research and development in Michigan every year and the industry generates \$4.8 billion annually in sales, according to the Michigan Economic Development Corp. While Michigan's new economy base continues to flounder, other states' life sciences industries are flourishing with the sensible support of their state legislatures.

Embryonic stem cell research can be done with respect to embryonic life and ethical guidelines. Michigan should not shut itself out of that research.

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