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Let people decide stem cell issue

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History is full of examples of political authorities and churches making fools of themselves by making various kinds of scientific research illegal. Most of us know the story of Galileo, the great 17th century astronomer and physicist who proposed that the Earth rotates around the sun. He was severely punished by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and the result embarrassed the church for centuries.

In this country, we had the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tenn., in which Clarence Darrow famously made monkeys out of William Jennings Bryan and the state authorities.

But we seem not to have learned very much from history. In 1978, the Michigan Legislature passed a law essentially banning all forms of research on human embryos. Then, in 1998, two years after scientists in Scotland cloned Dolly the sheep, our lawmakers amended that measure. The Legislature then made illegal reproductive cloning of any sort strictly illegal. That bill was at best, unnecessary.

Nobody is speaking out in favor of cloning people. But what that bill did was help the Michigan Legislature put itself firmly on the side of repression, and against science and progress. Any scientist who does research on human embryonic stem cells is now subject to jail time of up to 10 years and a fine of up to \$10 million.

Michigan is only one of five states around the country that operates under restrictions anywhere near that harsh. (In California, when the Bush administration cut off funding for embryonic stem cell research, Californians voted to fund it with billions of state dollars.)

So how has all this affected Michigan?

Well, it is helping transform us into a scientific backwater. It hasn't saved a single embryo — the ones that would have been used are leftovers from fertility clinics. If they can't be used for research, they are poured down the drain.

The only thing we have been "protected" from is scientists who might have come here and found a cure for terrible diseases like Parkinson's, macular degeneration and Huntington's chorea.

Now, for a better idea. Rep. Andrew Meisner, D-Ferndale, wants to hold a hearing next week on a bill that would allow embryonic stem cell research on embryos that have been discarded by fertility clinics, but only if the donor gives prior written consent and receives no financial compensation.

Meisner, who is 34 and in his final term, says it's both perverse and bizarre that present law makes it legal for fertility clinics to throw unused embryos into the garbage, but makes it illegal for a scientist to use those same embryos to try to cure disease.

Meisner thinks he's got the votes to get his bill out of the House Judiciary Committee, but he recognizes that it hasn't got a chance before the full House. That's why folks like Michigan philanthropist and shopping center magnate Al Taubman are spearheading a group called Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures to explore whether to put the measure on the statewide ballot in 2008.

Judging from current poll results, a healthy majority of Michigan citizens would support such a measure. Opponents, including Michigan Right to Life and the Michigan Catholic Conference, say the research would destroy human embryos. They fear it could lead to outright cloning. The Catholic Conference last month launched a campaign by mailing DVD's to Catholic homes and asking priests to condemn the issue during Mass.

Opponents also argue that research on adult stem cells, which is deemed not to threaten life, is just as promising as embryonic work. Scientists disagree. They counter that adult stem cells are limited in their ability to grow and transform themselves into the kinds of tissue that would support wide-ranging research.

What many don't realize is that in addition to the scientific and moral arguments, there is an economic development aspect to this debate. Other states — California, Massachusetts and New Jersey — have concluded stem cell research could be a terrific boost to the life sciences and related industries. Californians defied the Bush administration and passed a ballot issue that invested \$3 billion in state funds for stem cell research over a decade.

The Analysis Group, an economic research company, predicts that this investment will snowball, generating state revenues and health-care cost savings between \$6 billion and \$12 billion.

That's a lot of money, especially when you consider that scientists at the University of Michigan are among the national leaders in this field. But many are not willing to work here under current legal threat. Dr. Bennett Novitch, who was an assistant professor of cell and development biology, has taken his work on neuron stem cells to the University of California, Los Angeles.

Other startup firms around U-M are considering leaving the state, tired of trying to work within the restrictive Michigan law.

Professor Sean Morrison, one of the most respected scholars in the field, and director of U-M's Center for Stem Cell Biology, said bluntly, "As somebody who does adult stem cell research every day, if we're really serious about curing diseases, we should be studying both embryonic and adult stem cells."

He is right, of course. Even if he wasn't, Meisner's bill deserves a fair hearing. And if he can't get that hearing in the Legislature — and maybe even if he can — the proposal to legalize embryonic stem cell research is so vastly important that it deserves to be taken to the people for a statewide up-or-down vote.

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