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Former lawmaker: Embryonic stem cell research vital

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Former Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz had a stark message on stem cell research Tuesday night, when he spoke at the Livingston County Democratic Party headquarters: Those who oppose the use of embryonic stem cells should realize they're outnumbered.

He said, to people who have objections on moral grounds to research on embryonic stem cells, "you have every right to have them, but you are in the minority."

And, he said, bowing to those objections would be to allow "the tyranny of the minority, and I don't think that's right."

Schwarz, an independent for the past year, and Marcia Baum of the nonprofit educational group Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures spoke to an audience of about 30 people at the Democrats' Brighton-area offices, explaining some of the scientific methods used to get embryonic stem cells.

For example, the cells are only available from "blastocysts," which are groups of between 50 and 150 cells found in fertilized eggs between four and five days old.

That was a surprise to Brighton Township resident Tony Salmeto, a Howell school teacher who has a daughter with multiple sclerosis.

"I didn't realize that. We're not talking about fetuses," he said. "The political element is undermining the hope for those of us with family or loved ones who might benefit" from embryonic stem cell research.

Baum said embryonic stem cells are potentially extremely valuable because they have the ability to grow in to any type of cell. For example, they could become neurons and potentially restore movement to paralyzed people, or become the type of pancreatic cell that produces insulin to help people with diabetes.

She said there are about 400,000 embryos in the blastocyst stage at fertility clinics that could be used for embryonic stem cell research and that may otherwise be discarded. That's more than enough, she said, to do significant research without the risk of running out.

Michigan is one of a handful of states — including Arkansas, Louisiana and North and South Dakota — with restrictions on embryonic stem cell research. Under current law, it is a felony with a jail term of up to five years to destroy an embryo in the course of scientific research. Schwarz called that law "backward."

He also said that if legislation in Lansing loosening those restrictions is not approved, proponents would work to put statewide ballot question to voters in November 2008. He also predicted rules enacted by President George W. Bush in 2001 restricting federal funding will be overturned by Congress and signed into law in 2009.

"This train will leave the station and I want Michigan to be on it, and in particular our research institutions," he said.

He said groups like Right to Life of Michigan and the Catholic Church leadership will never be convinced to end their opposition to embryonic stem cell research.

"I don't think its possible to bring them into the fold," he said, and accused them of being disingenuous.

Schwarz is a physician and served one term in Congress before being defeated in the 2006 GOP primary by Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Tipton.

One member of the audience, Lee Noll of Whitmore Lake, said he is on the verge of moving his company, which creates an controlled environment to grow embryonic stem cells, to Texas because of Michigan's restrictive law. He said economic development opportunities are greater in Texas.

The legislation proposed in Lansing, House Bills 4616-8, would allow the use of the cells under certain conditions, including if they come from fertility treatments and would otherwise be discarded, and if permission is received from the potential mother and father. The legislation also would increase penalties for human cloning.

The legislation was the subject of a hearing in front of the House Judiciary Committee on Nov. 7. At that meeting, opposition to the proposal came from a couple who had adopted, implanted, gave birth to and are raising two children from frozen embryos from a fertility clinic.

David and Stacy Giesen, according to testimony on the Legislature's Web site, said that stem cell research holds nothing but empty promises, and that destroying an embryo when it could be adopted is the wrong thing to do.

Another voice in opposition was Ann Stevenson, who suffers from multiple sclerosis but said she would reject stem cell-based treatment "to maintain my integrity."

Meanwhile, Republican state Sen. Valde Garcia of Marion Township has said he's concerned that opening the door to research using embryos could end up with people creating them merely for scientific purposes. That, he said, would be morally questionable.