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## **Proposal 2 passage brings joy for some, concern for others**

*JEAN SPEENER*

Joan Szczepanski felt a wave of joy and relief when news came across her television on election night that voters passed the proposal to allow embryonic stem cell research in Michigan.

"Tears started running down my face," said the 55-year-old Bay City woman and founder of the three-year-old Mid Michigan Young Onset Parkinson's Disease Support Group.

"I had to go wake up my husband. He said, 'Now we know there are other people out there who care.' It's not just for me, it's for everyone out there."

Szczepanski, 55, first began experiencing the symptoms of Parkinson's -- a brain disease that affects the control of muscles, and so impacts movement, speech and posture -- in her 40s. For the past four years, Dr. John Goudreau at Michigan State University has cared for Szczepanski. She credits him for keeping her symptoms in check.

Voter approval of the ballot measure, which loosens restrictions on embryonic stem cell research, "is going to give a lot of people hope," Szczepanski said.

Still, scientists at two Saginaw facilities do not plan to participate in the controversial experimentation. Researchers at Field Neurosciences Institute and Michigan Cardiovascular Institute will continue their work with adult stem cells, doctors there said.

Field Neurosciences, 4677 Towne Centre in Saginaw Township, is affiliated with St. Mary's of Michigan hospital, a member of St. Louis-based Ascension Health, the nation's largest Catholic nonprofit health system.

Catholic bishops statewide came out against the proposal, saying it was scientifically unnecessary. The Michigan Catholic Conference and Right to Life of Michigan largely funded the opposition campaign.

The proposal, which voters passed 53 percent to 47 percent, allows the use of human embryos for research permitted under federal law. It prohibits selling or buying embryos for research and stem cell extraction 14 days after cell division starts.

The stem cells come from embryos that were intended for fertility treatment purposes and typically are discarded.

The proposal overturns a 1978 Michigan law that prohibited such use. The amendment takes effect Friday, Dec. 19.

Supporters say the proposal could mean that millions in research grants will come into the state -- and medical breakthroughs for a host of ailments will come out of it.

However, "the outcome for FNI and my personal research will not be affected," said Dr. Gary Dunbar, Field Neurosciences's executive director and director of the neuroscience program at Central Michigan University.

Research with embryonic stem cells remains an emotionally charged issue," said Dr. Peter Fattal, director of the State of the Heart research program at MCVI, 1015 S. Washington in Saginaw.

"From the pure science of it, scientists who do research in the stem cell field recognize that it is still early on in its development," he said.

For that reason, some may hesitate before moving forward with such studies.

"As the ethical dilemma has persisted, scientists have started to look at other alternatives," Fattal said.

"From a standpoint from research, a lot of questions are yet to be resolved. Proponents are hoping this may be able to answer questions and provide some technologies to be brought into the state which then can grow."

University of Michigan President Mary Sue Coleman released a statement Tuesday.

"By expanding research with the creation of new embryonic stem cells, University of Michigan scientists can broaden their pursuit of therapies and cures for medical disorders that touch the lives of thousands of Michigan families," she said.

"This endorsement by voters will strengthen our ability not only to improve the health of our communities, but also to boost the intellectual and economic vitality that is critical to the future of our region."

Sean Morrison, director of the Center for Stem Cell Biology at U-M, also applauded the vote outcome.

"Proposal 2 will allow research in Michigan that is already occurring throughout most of the rest of the country, while entrenching restrictions in the state Constitution that ensure that the research is performed ethically and under oversight mandated by federal law," he said. "The University of Michigan will launch new research programs that we expect to advance the science of stem cell biology and the treatment of patients."

State Sen. Roger Kahn, a Saginaw Township Republican and cardiologist, opposed the initiative. "It removes from oversight this emerging field within science," he said. "Now we have to try and find ways to follow the will of the people and provide protection for them."

Such protection may involve shielding against research abuse, unscrupulous activities or the spread of disease, he said.

"I don't think this is going to lead us down a slippery slope," Dunbar said. "You have a lot of members with juvenile diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's hoping that this may provide some help, and it might. It's still a matter of potential, not a matter of realization yet." v

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