

Schwarz New Face Of Stem Cell Group

Larry **OWEN** is out as head of CureMichigan and Joe **SCHWARZ** is in.

After a couple months on the job helping to close out the signature-gathering process for the pro-embryonic stem cell group, Owen has stepped down and will be a member of the board.

"Larry Owen has time constraints like everybody else," said board member and GOP former House Speaker Rick **JOHNSON**.

Johnson said the board tapped Schwarz as its public face for his leadership getting legislation passed in Congress, which was vetoed by President George W. **BUSH**, when he was a freshman member of the U.S. House. The board also picked him since he's a surgeon, noting that the opposition group has a physician at its helm, Sen. Tom **GEORGE** (R-Texas Twp.)

Johnson said he'd like to see the two debate.

"Nobody knows the issue better than Joe Schwarz," said Johnson. "Joe knows it inside and out."

Schwarz, a Republican turned independent, is also an old foe of Right to Life, which should make for a spirited campaign.

When asked about what voters should believe in the war of information, Schwarz said, "I would say they should put their faith in an organization whose sole goal in this campaign is to make research, treatment and cures available to all people everywhere. That seems to be a correct and appropriate goal.

"By the same token, what's the goal of the opposition? To prevent people from having access to the benefits of embryonic stem cell research on what is an essentially religious or ecclesiastic basis."

Owen's ouster has been brewing, as *MIRS* has reported since July. His leadership made waves, with one board member telling *MIRS* it was unclear how he ended up running the show (See "**Owen On The Way Out?**" 7/17/08). Sources said Owen was in the process of hiring Main Street Strategies to replace CureMichigan staffers Mark **BURTON**, Amber **SHIN** and Ben **MILLER**. Under the new leadership situation, the trio will be back, a well-placed source told *MIRS*, as has been the rumor for weeks. More staffers will be hired soon.

As the board sorted out the situation, the anti-embryonic stem cell group MiCAUSE and Right to Life of Michigan got organized (See "**Curtain Goes Up On Anti-Stem Cell Group,**" 8/11/08). Some CureMichigan board members told *MIRS* they aren't worried that they've lost time, saying that the controversy has been overplayed by the media. They also shot down rumors that the group is in financial trouble.

There reportedly was no big board meeting, about Owen but the change in the organization's direction was made last week.

Former Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Michigan head Dick **WHITMER** was the group's first chairman, who oversaw the startup and handed over the reins to Owen, the former East Lansing mayor, during the last signature push.

More changes are on the way for CureMichigan. *MIRS* has learned an executive committee will be formed with Johnson; John **SIMON** of the Taubman Foundation, which has helped finance the effort; and a Democrat to be named soon. Schwarz will serve as spokesman.

"My goal is to accurately disseminate information about embryonic stem cells -- about their potential for treatment and cures for a multiplicity of diseases, with emphasis on juvenile diabetes," Schwarz said.

He said he'll draw a distinction between embryonic and adult stem cells, which don't have the potential to form pancreatic beta cells for a potential treatment to juvenile diabetes that would be an alternative to taking insulin. The group will also make it clear that it opposes human cloning and the initiative does not open the door. The stem cell research outlined in the amendment, Schwarz said, uses fertilized eggs left over from in vitro fertilization, according to guidelines from the National Institutes of Health and U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services.

"These would literally be tossed out in the trash," Schwarz said.