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Enjoy the dark ages

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How would you like it if a group of religious nuts seized your state government and vowed to choke off important advances in science and medicine — even at the expense of further damaging our state's badly limping economy?

Well, guess what. That's what's happened in Michigan, without most of us even noticing, and that's no exaggeration. I am talking about embryonic stem cell research, biology's hope of the future. Our state is being prevented from making progress or doing research in this vital area by fundamentalist zealots — mostly, the badly misnamed group Right to Life of Michigan.

Right to Life was set up, as you likely know, to prevent women from having the right to control their own reproductive systems. They are, in other words, an anti-abortion group. That's fine; Right to Life is perfectly free to argue against what the U.S. Supreme Court says is a constitutional right.

They are, at least, fairly honest about where they are coming from on abortion, though, like most of their ilk, they generally show little or no interest in what might become of the unwanted babies they would force women to bear.

But now they are also doing their best to destroy our medical and economic hopes for the future. They oppose stem cell research, something that doesn't involve destroying a single potential life, though they sometimes lie and say it does. They also like to pretend researchers can learn just as much from stem cells that come from healthy adults, though virtually no biologists believe that. The fact is that embryonic stem cell research has more potential for good than any other technology in a long, long time.

Embryonic stem cells are, scientists tell me, sort of a fast-growing, universal genetic substance that, properly prodded, can grow into all sorts of different kinds of cells. Thanks to a new technique called "somatic cell nuclear transfer," it may be possible to solve the problem of tissue rejection.

The potential that opens up is almost beyond imagining.

Otherwise crusty scientists have been known to wax lyrical about the potential of all this. There is a real possibility that, with time and experimentation, the effects of diseases from Parkinson's to Alzheimer's may be rolled back.

People with severe spinal cord injuries might be able to recover function in their paralyzed limbs. Michigan has excellent research facilities, including the University of Michigan's medical center and the Van Andel Institute in Grand Rapids. But not only can such research not qualify for government funding here, it cannot even be legally done. Believe it or not, Mississippi's laws on embryonic stem cell research are better than ours. Only four small, backward states have laws as restrictive as ours: North and South Dakota, Arkansas and Louisiana.

None of those states have the ability to do world-class stem cell research anyway. We do, but our scientists, such as Sean Morrison, director of the University of Michigan's Center for Stem Cell Biology, are forbidden from it by our medieval laws. Some of our best scientists have left.

Others are, sadly, certain to go. State Rep. Andy Meisner (D-Ferndale) knows how stupid this is. He's holding hearings on a bill that would allow embryonic stem cell research. State Sen. Gretchen Whitmer (D-East Lansing) is trying to do the same thing in the Michigan Senate. But they are unlikely to succeed. The elected zombies Right to Life controls are too strong.

There is an alternative, however: Putting a constitutional amendment on next year's ballot that would allow this, and a group called Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures is trying to do just that. Right to Life, which has a lot in common with the Taliban, will fight that tooth and nail. They know that if it gets on the ballot it will win overwhelmingly.

You can contact the good guys at stemcellresearchformichigan.com or 248-948-5555.

By the way, here's something else the Taliban won't tell you. Every day they stymie stem cell research is another day they steal money from you. Civilized states like California know this. Our pathetic president has twice vetoed, you may remember, federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, his fellow Republican, promptly encouraged his state to defy the Shrub and invest \$3 billion. He's no fool; a nonpartisan study shows they'll get back up to \$12.6 billion as a result.

Naturally, this doesn't matter, because we don't need new jobs or money in Michigan, right? After all, we'll always have clapboard churches.

And, for the refined, Gregorian chants.