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Hope deferred is hope denied

By Kimberlydawn Wisdom, M.D.

Until it happens, none of us truly knows the discomfort, pain and sometimes utter horror of living inside a broken body.

Look at the vigorous middle-aged woman whose once beautiful hair is nearly gone - a family trait. Look at the man whose front teeth were shattered in a car accident, now ashamed of his obvious replacements. Look at the little girl who averts her eyes because she knows you can't miss the thick scars on her once badly burned skin. Look at the war veteran whose ears are gone, each replaced by a ring of scars.

Now look at the child writhing in pain because, in the genetic lottery, he was born with a disease that twists some of his blood cells into the shape of a sickle, which tangle and snag as they're pushed through his smaller blood vessels. See the once vital actor struggle with simple speech and no longer able to control the tremors that make his head bobble because of Parkinson's disease. Now look at the woman whose body is wasted, who cannot speak, swallow, chew, stand or dress herself. And understand that as ruined as her body is, her mind is still very clear and she knows exactly what is happening to her because of ALS, often called Lou Gehrig's disease.

Now tell them all that there is promise science may one day be able to make them whole, but their hope is being thrown out in the trash.

This is the story of stem cell research today in Michigan, where physicians and scientists can go to prison for investigating the potential of fresh embryonic stem cells to cure afflictions from broken teeth to fractured spines to cancer. Proposal 2 on this fall's ballot may change that. It could also play a significant part in changing the face of the state's economy.

Stem cells are the seeds for every kind of tissue in the human body. As they divide, some develop into bones, others into vital organs, and on through the list of what we're all made of. Put at its simplest, if scientists collect these cells and can persuade them to develop normally under controlled lab conditions, they may become replacements for diseased or otherwise damaged body parts. And they can continue to do it, as far as is now known, forever.

On Aug. 9, 2001, President Bush cut off federal funds for stem cell research using anything but embryos already collected by that date. The amount was small, considering the needs of the American research community, not ethnically diverse and now, leading researchers say, too old to be very useful.

This left the most promising research to other funding sources, including states, and Michigan is one of only five that forbids re-



Dr. Kimberlydawn Wisdom about 100 cells in an egg that could fit on the point of a pin. They have no body parts, organs or nervous system, although they could develop into any of them.

search on new embryonic stem cells.

It's a highly controversial subject, with most of the opposition coming from those with moral or religious objections. The powerful Right to Life movement insists that human existence begins at the moment of conception. Scientists call embryos used in stem cell research "blastocysts," which hold

Under Proposal 2, Michigan law would allow research only on embryos created for in vitro fertilization, but not used for a variety of reasons, including by choice of the prospective parents. Their permission would be required for stem cell research.

Every day, such embryos are thrown away as medical waste. These potentially life-saving, life-changing, life-improving cells are discarded while people are suffering from potentially curable ailments. Top embryonic stem cell researchers and talented newcomers are leaving our state to escape its rigid restrictions. Others don't come here in the first place.

In a study released earlier this month, Wayne State University economist Allen C. Goodman found:

- It costs \$8 billion a year to treat Michigan residents for conditions that could be relieved by embryonic stem cell research.
- Even a 2 percent improvement in productivity by workers who have such conditions would save them and their employers \$19.2 million.
- Just a 1 percent employment increase for new embryonic stem cell research would create more than 1,100 jobs with \$51 million in new payroll.

In November, Michigan voters will decide whether hope for so many will continue to be taken out with the trash. No matter how they choose, it will be a question of conscience.

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