

Research begins at stem cell lab

Privately funded facility avoids

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The University's privately funded stem cell lab in Life Sciences Building is up and running.

The lab now houses a line of human embryonic stem cells from the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

More are on the way.

The lab is funded entirely by private donors in order to avoid running afoul of a federal law that prohibits the use of federal funds for embryonic stem cell research, besides in the case of a few National Institutes of Health-approved lines.

Sean Morrison, the director of the University's Center for Stem Cell Biology, said that an Embryonic Stem Cell Research Oversight committee is in place and will approve all future transactions involving human embryonic stem cells.

Only when the committee deems a research proposal to meet ethical standards can a transfer of stem cells proceed.

All of the stem cells that University researchers have sought are from the few lines that the federal government allows research on with federal funding.

Tom Zdeba processes the Material Transfer Agreements concerned with human embryonic stem cells. He said that while there were about 10 stem cell transfers that were approved and processed before the establishment of the oversight committee, all requests for the study of human embryonic stem cells would now require the committee's approval.

Currently, there are five pending requests from University researchers for federally-approved human embryonic stem cell lines.

They are slated to be reviewed by the oversight committee at a meeting today.

Zdeba said that this process might eventually provide a mechanism for researchers in Morrison's privately funded lab to obtain stem cell lines other than the few that are federally approved.

"It's a deliberate process, but we're getting there," he said.

Morrison said obtaining these unapproved cell lines is critical to his research.

Although Morrison can currently perform some research from the approved lines, he said the cells from the federally approved lines do not harbor the genetic defects that he would need to study neurodegenerative diseases.

Morrison said the lines he needs could be derived from embryos frozen in fertility clinic storage, but it is illegal to derive new embryonic stem cell lines in the state of Michigan.

He vigorously denounced the state laws that he said restrict his research.

"These laws not only ignore everything we know about the sciences and the wishes of the general public, they also ignore the laws of the country," Morrison said.