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Repeal of stem cell research ban seeks spot on ballot

'U' officials can't support initiative, but support change to stem cell laws

BY: EMILY BARTON, DAILY NEWS EDITOR

Hoping to overturn the state's ban on embryonic stem cell research, a ballot question committee is moving forward with plans to place an initiative on the November ballot allowing voters to decide whether the research should be legal in Michigan.

The Stem Cell Research Ballot Question Committee, formed in October, has until July 7 to gather 380,126 signatures - the number required to place an initiative on the state's ballot.

Campaign Director Mark Burton said the committee wouldn't say how many signatures have been collected so far, but said he thinks the group will gather enough to place the initiative on the ballot in the fall.

"We are very confident and we are planning a long campaign with the assumption that we will get the signatures needed," he said.

The committee submitted official ballot language in January. If passed, the amendment would overturn a 1978 Michigan law and allow researchers to derive their own stem cell lines from embryos. Only embryos that would otherwise be discarded by fertility clinics would be used for research.

The initiative wouldn't reverse Michigan's ban on cloning.

Though the University is an advocate of embryonic stem cell research, it doesn't have any role in campaigning for the ballot initiative.

Cynthia Wilbanks, the University's vice president of government relations, said the University has supported a change in the state's research laws, but said the University cannot take an institutional position on the issue because it receives funding from the state.

Robin Stephenson, director of information for the University's Life Sciences, said the University has no role in campaigning, but is an advocate embryonic stem cell research. She said she thinks a ballot initiative would have a better chance of passing, and passing sooner, than similar legislation pending in the state House of Representatives.

A bill proposed in April 2007 by Rep. Andy Meisner (D-Ferndale) is still waiting to go before a House Judiciary Committee. The ballot committee decided to push for a constitutional amendment instead of a change to state law because of how long the bill has been waiting to go before a committee.

Even though the University can't openly campaign for the ballot initiative, the campaign still has strong University ties.

Sean Morrison, director of the University's Center for Stem Cell Biology is a founding member of Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures, an organization that works to educate Michigan residents on stem cell research.

While Morrison hasn't been involved directly with the ballot committee, he continues to work with MCSCRC to educate Michigan residents about stem cell research and the legislation.

Marcia Baum, executive director of MCSCRC, acted as a spokeswoman for the ballot committee before it formed its own campaign group in November.

The executive board is comprised of 10 members. The original four are Rick Johnson, former speaker of the state House; former U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz (R-Battle Creek); Richard Whitmer, former president and chief executive officer of Blue Cross Blue Shield; and Detroit Attorney Linda Bloch. In March, six new members were appointed to the board, including S. Martin Taylor, chair of the University Board of Regents.

Morrison said he personally supports the ballot initiative because it would give University researchers more stem cell research opportunities.

There are two basic kinds of stem cell research: adult and embryonic. Embryonic stem cells can divide indefinitely, and have the potential to grow into any kind of cell, making them easier for researchers to work with. Adult stem cells are less flexible than embryonic stem cells because they are partially specialized and limited in quantity.

The University opened a lab in February 2007 that uses private funding to conduct research on embryonic stem cells. Because of Michigan law, though, researchers in the lab aren't allowed to derive their own stem cell lines. Instead, they must obtain stem cells from other universities and research centers, which Morrison said slows the research process.

"That's a huge impediment, because we can't study diseases here in Michigan, because we can't do research until someone else derives the line in the other state," Morrison said.

Baum said MCSCRC officially supports stem cell research, but doesn't campaign for any form of legislation. She said it works to educate voters about the different kinds of stem cell research so they can make an informed decision.

LSA junior Landon Krantz, president of the Student Society for Stem Cell Research, said his group supports the ballot initiative. He said he wants the group's members to take petitions home over the summer and to go door-to-door collecting signatures to help the campaign.

"I don't think something as tedious and minute as signatures is going to stop it from getting on the ballot," he said.

Krantz said he is convinced that when voters become educated on the issue, they will vote yes on the ballot.

"When people know the facts, absolutely it'll pass," he said.

LSA sophomore Lauren Bennett, chair of the University's chapter of Students for Life, which opposes embryonic stem cell research, said her group has been hosting educational debates and lectures on campus. She said she'd be interested in campaigning more in the fall as the election draws closer. "We'd be really interested in doing that," she said.

The ballot initiative faces opposition from Right to Life of Michigan and the Michigan Catholic Conference, which believe embryonic stem cell research shouldn't be done because it destroys the embryos.

Pam Sherstad, spokeswoman for Right to Life, said while the group advocates adult stem cell research, it doesn't see the need to destroy embryos that could otherwise develop into a human life. Sherstad said the group is currently concentrating on educating voters, but that it would shift its focus to look at the ballot language if enough signatures are gathered to put the initiative on the ballot.

"We continue to be a voice for the voiceless," she said. "We all began as embryos."

AN OVERTURNING POINT?

What could be on this fall's ballot

The proposed amendment would not change the state ban on human cloning.

Michigan residents would have access to any therapies and cures that may result from the research. The language stipulates that the research must be conducted ethically, and the only embryos that will be used are those that would otherwise be discarded at fertility clinics. Embryos cannot be bought and sold for research, which must follow laws set in place by the Michigan government as long as those laws aren't too restrictive.