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Stem cell ban reversal on ballot

Amendment would repeal law against destroying embryos

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Sean Morrison's job as director of the University's Center for Stem Cell Biology is difficult, to say the least.

In the state of Michigan, it's currently illegal to destroy embryos for research purposes, making it difficult for him to conduct his studies.

Morrison said embryonic stem cells could provide many new ways to treat diseases because they may have the ability to generate any cell type in the body in unlimited quantities. But it's impossible to find out exactly what they are capable of until the research is done, he said.

Morrison has had trouble recruiting scientists to do that research, he said, because of the state's restrictions.

But his job may get a little easier.

A constitutional amendment to end the state's ban will most likely be on Michigan's ballot next November. The group Cure Michigan submitted 570,016 signatures to the Secretary of State July 7, far more signatures than the 380,126 required to put an proposal on the ballot. The Secretary of State is currently reviewing the petition.

The 1978 law frustrating Morrison makes it illegal to perform scientific research in which a human embryo is imperiled or destroyed. Taking stem cells from an embryo destroys it, so Morrison has only two options.

They can take stem cells from adults, but Morrison said adult stem cells don't have the same potential as embryonic stem cells. Researchers can buy expensive embryonic stem cells from outside the state, but Morrison said they can't be bought with public funding.

Marcia Baum, executive director of Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures, an organization supporting the proposal, said the current law doesn't fulfill its intended goal. It doesn't stop their destruction outright, she said.

Couples that undergo in vitro fertilization and don't want to store their unused embryos can destroy them, but can't donate them for research.

"In 45 other states, couples are given the option to donate embryos to a research facility to find treatments and cures," Baum said.

Amber Shinn, communications director for the CureMichigan ballot initiative, said the group is working hard to explain the benefits of stem cell research.

"Of course we're going to work on educating the voters," Shinn said. "Making sure that they understand that this is a great choice for the health and wellbeing of our state."

Michigan Citizens Against Unrestricted Science and Experimentation (MI-CAUSE) formed in opposition to the ballot initiative.

Dave Doyle, the spokesperson for MI-CAUSE, said the group's goal is to educate people about what he said is really in the constitutional amendment.

"What the proponents are saying and what's actually in the language are two different things," he said. "What this proposal allows for is completely unregulated and unrestricted experimentation on human embryos."

Brady Smith, chair of the University's chapter of the College Republicans, said his group has not made a decision whether or not to support the initiative, but will consider the amendment.

Nathaniel Eli Coats Styer, chair of the University's chapter of the College Democrats, said his group is very excited about the proposal and will support it in the fall.

"By having this ballot initiative we can excite Democrats and especially kids on campus here," he said. "We'll definitely be pushing for it along with the rest of our campaigning this fall."