



PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
Michigan Chapter
Chartered by United States Congress



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STATEMENT OF MICHAEL HARRIS
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BEFORE THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

CONCERNING
HOUSE BILL 4616/4617/4618

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Mr. Chairman, and fellow members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to give testimony in support of legislation (HB 4616, HB 4617, HB 4617) that would remove statutory limits in Michigan on allowing state funds and institutions to perform ethical and science-based embryonic stem cell research; allow for the creation of stem cells through certain scientific procedures; and which retain and strengthen the ban on human reproductive cloning.

I'm Michael Harris, Executive Director for the Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America, or MPVA. MPVA is one of the numerous chapters of the Washington, D.C.-based Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA). Our members are honorably discharged veterans of the United States Armed Services who incurred spinal cord injury or disease that resulted in paralysis and requires them to use a wheelchair for mobility. One of PVA's fundamental missions is to fund research that develops treatments for paralysis.

The issue we face today is not whether to move forward with embryonic stem cell research, but how. How do we ensure that all unnecessary barriers to the research and development of life-saving cures are removed? How do we establish parameters that provide ethical oversight of this most delicate issue? And how do we help as many people as possible as expediently as possible? Unfortunately, today these questions are being answered in the context of a policy that imprisons the potential of Michigan's leading scientists.

Spinal cord injuries are dramatic. In an instant, the victim is transformed from a fully functional, independent individual to one who suddenly lives with severe restrictions and perhaps, a lifelong dependency on others. Paralysis is a devastating experience for the affected individual and for family and friends as well. The number one psychological problem that comes with a spinal cord injury is the symbolic end of life as it was "supposed to be."

For years researchers classically viewed the spinal cord as lacking regenerative capability following injury, a viewpoint that reinforced the pessimistic concept that functional recovery following human spinal cord injury is impossible.

However, research today demonstrates that in the right conditions spinal cord neurons do regenerate following injury.

As Americans face the potential for unprecedented life expectancy we also see unprecedented medical advancements. It is now our responsibility to do everything possible to protect the quality of life of the present and future generations. A critical factor is our use of human embryonic stem cells. These cells have the demonstrated potential to cure conditions including Parkinson's Disease, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, heart disease, Alzheimer's, Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS), even spinal cord injuries like my own. Stem cells have been called the body's self repair kit.

That is why MPVA supports using stem cells derived from excess frozen embryos that otherwise would be discarded in order to save, extend and improve lives. Every year hundreds of thousands of couples experience the joy of childbirth

through in-vitro fertilization, a process which necessarily creates more embryos than can be used. Under proper supervision, scientists should be allowed to take cells only from couples who freely consent to their use for research.

But why has the use of discarded embryos for research suddenly become such an issue? Is it more ethical for a couple to donate unused embryos that will never become human beings, or to let them be tossed away as garbage when they could help save thousands of lives? While we prolong the stem cell debate, millions suffer.

For those of us living with spinal cord injuries our pain, suffering and psychological trauma will continue until scientists have the financial resources and freedoms they need to find the right combination of therapies and cell transplants. A spinal cord injury can happen to anyone, anytime, anywhere. I know this better than most because I suffered a severe spinal trauma twenty years ago. It is common knowledge in the spinal cord community that a cure is not an “if” but a “when” and in my mind that “when” is now.

As much as we would like to see an immediate cure for spinal cord injury, it won't come through “shortcut solutions”. The key to a cure is in supporting basic research efforts, slowly developing the answers to the most fundamental questions in biology. Only when those questions are answered will it be possible to develop approaches toward curing spinal cord injury and other unacceptable medical conditions.

As an organization we understand that support for this research raises concerns among people of good will, each trying to do what's right based on their very personal religious and moral beliefs. I have not shied from that personal soul searching, nor has MPVA in its policy making. Nor should anyone!

It's my heartfelt view that embryonic stem cell research is truly life affirming. It is a direct outcome of a couple making a choice, without being coerced or compensated, to donate to research a fertilized egg not used in-vitro fertilization. This precious egg would have otherwise been discarded -- or frozen forever.

Because of the great potential of stem cell research, donating un-used fertilized eggs is as much a life-giving choice as the decision a family makes to donate a child's healthy organs following a fatal automobile accident. It is the pinnacle of charity to give so totally, so freely, of one's self in order to give life to another.

MPVA urges members of the Health Policy Committee to open the door to research on all excess embryonic stem cells derived from in-vitro fertilization, and to do so with government oversight that ensures ethical research procedures.

There are a few moments in medical history when we can clearly identify a giant step forward in improving countless lives. We saw it with the discovery of antibiotics. In fact, until the discovery of penicillin, Americans with the injuries our members have suffered were lucky to live another eighteen months after their catastrophic spinal cord injury.

Mr. Chairman, MPVA believes that embryonic stem cell research is another of these great moments. Today this committee has an historic opportunity to make a difference in the quality of the lives of paralyzed veterans by overturning Michigan's ban on embryonic stem cell research so that researchers can move forward to pursue scientific investigation freely.

Perhaps one day Michigan's paralyzed veterans will walk into your office to thank you in person.

Thanks you, Mr. Chairman for allowing MPVA to testify today before your committee. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them at this time.

WHO IS PVA?

The Paralyzed Veterans of America was founded in 1947 to address the needs and concerns of veterans who have sustained an injury or disease of the spinal cord. PVA is devoting its life and effort to enhancing the quality of life for these veterans and other persons with disabilities by administering programs in research, wheelchair sports, legislation and advocating for improved civil rights for persons with a disability regardless of race, creed or color.