

October 25, 2007

Stem cell research proponents boost efforts

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Supporters of embryonic stem-cell research are making a concerted push to overturn state laws that they say restrict Michigan's ability to attract pioneering research and new life science investment.

The state House Judiciary Committee plans to hold a hearing Oct. 31 on legislation that would ease what some consider some of the nation's strongest restrictions placed on embryonic stem-cell research. Unclear is whether the hearing will be postponed since it's also the deadline for lawmakers to formally ratify the state's budget.

Proponents also have formally registered a ballot committee that is exploring the possibility of launching a petition drive to bring the issue to the statewide ballot in November 2008.

The Southfield-based nonprofit Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research & Cures, which is affiliated with the ballot committee, recently received a \$1.4 million donation from shopping mall developer and philanthropist A. Alfred Taubman to support educational efforts.

The scientific community is "almost unanimous" in agreement that embryonic and other kinds of stem cell research is key to developing new cures for diseases, said Randal Charlton, interim director for Detroit's TechTown and former CEO of Asterand plc [LSE:ATD], a human-tissue bank. Unlike adult stem cells, embryonic stem cells can develop into any type of cell in the body and could yield cures or medical therapies for diseases such as cancer, diabetes and Parkinson's.

"There's a sense that if we don't bring our laws into line with just about everybody else in the United States, companies considering Michigan as a place to get into the life sciences will say 'We'd better go to California or New York, somewhere where the laws are less restrictive,'" Charlton said.

But opponents, including Right to Life of Michigan, liken the science to abortion because it necessitates the destruction of the embryo, and say it could result in human cloning. They also point out the research hasn't yet produced a cure.

The Michigan Catholic Conference said it has sent letters and DVDs to church members and encouraged local parishes to discuss the issue during Mass.

"Human life is not a commodity that can be created and killed in an effort to generate profits and patents," Monica Kostielney, the conference's president and CEO, said in a statement.

State laws passed in 1978 and 1999 prohibit the destruction of an embryo in research and make it a crime to clone a human embryo.

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Andy Meisner, D-Ferndale, would allow embryonic stem cells to be cloned for scientific research while increasing penalties for human cloning. It would also allow scientists to use embryos left over from in-vitro fertilization clinics if their donors give consent.

"Right now those are being thrown away," Meisner said.

While the measure has the support of Gov. Jennifer Granholm, it has found little traction in recent years among Republicans in the Legislature.

Ballot committee members are weighing potential cost and other issues and hope to decide whether to move forward by the end of the year, said spokesman David Waymire. The group would need to collect 340,101 valid signatures to bring the issue to a vote of the Legislature, or 380,126 valid signatures to place the issue on the November 2008 ballot.

That's likely not soon enough for Lee Noll, CEO of a Whitmore Lake startup company called BioFlow Technology, which has developed a tool for culturing organ tissues that partly depends on doing development work with embryonic stem cells.

The state's laws could force the company to either move altogether or locate research operations in another state with more liberalized laws. The laws have also complicated the company's ability to attract venture capital, Noll said.

"We will be successful," Noll said. "The company has a lot of potential. I wish it could be here."