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Get the facts about Michigan's embryonic stem cell proposal

BY GARY GOSSELIN

November will almost certainly bring a statewide vote on whether to allow embryonic stem cell research in Michigan.

About 600,000 petition signatures have been turned in, and only 360,000 need to be certified to make it to the ballot.

The measure would let scientists conduct embryonic stem cell research that supporters say offers the most promising hope for new therapies and cures for myriad diseases. It would also continue certain safeguards, restricting the sale of human embryos and keeping the state's ban on cloning.

The initiative also narrowly defines which stem cells can be used. Use would be limited to those that would otherwise have been destroyed by fertility clinics, and used only with the consent of the donors.

Michigan Citizens Against Unrestricted Science and Experimentation, www.micause.com, would have people believe otherwise, but the language is very clear both in keeping the ban on cloning and stating which embryonic stem cells can be used.

In 2002, the RAND Corp. and the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology determined that there were about 400,000 frozen embryos in clinics in the U.S., a number that's likely higher now.

That means there are a lot of stem cells out there to potentially work with. But Michigan law makes it a felony to conduct research on these cells.

"The current laws send a chilling message to the life sciences sector, including business, because unlike other states that allow this research, it is punishable by imprisonment in the state of Michigan," said Shawn Morrison, research associate professor at the University of Michigan's Life Sciences Institute and director for the Center for Stem Cell Biology.

Only North and South Dakota, Louisiana and Arkansas have laws as restrictive as Michigan, said Larry Owen of CureMichigan.com, and this is holding back a big portion of the research community here.

David Doyle of MICAUSE said there are plenty of loopholes in the language, but I couldn't find them.

The language does not appear to allow rampant unrestricted use and has strict limits about which cells can be used - basically, those that otherwise would have been thrown away.

There are provisions that note all federal laws apply and general safety-related regulations also apply to stem cell research.

Like it or not, there is a lot of research being done on stem cells, and although there have been promising breakthroughs with adult stem cells, more could be done faster in Michigan with this initiative.

This proposal seems to make sense for scientific research and moving the life sciences community forward.

But for a majority of people, it is not merely a choice of good science; it comes down to a personal values decision.

If you have a moral objection, that's different; you have made up your mind already.

But don't let confusing rhetoric about hidden language and monstrous scientific consequences taint your decision if you are trying to decide this on its merits rather than the moral implications.

I'd strongly encourage visiting both Web sites, reading the language for yourself and making an informed decision.