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Embryonic stem-cell research needs state voters' approval

BY MERRITT K. TAYLOR

I research adult stem cells, and my family here in West Michigan believes life begins at conception. Over dinner, we've had many conversations about the vital role embryonic stem-cell research plays in the search for therapies and cures for diabetes, Parkinson's disease, recovery from spinal cord damage and more.

On Nov. 4, Michigan voters will be asked to support Proposal 2, the expansion of embryonic stem cell research. I hope my family understands that easing Michigan's restrictions is critical to identify therapies and cures for devastating diseases afflicting our friends, family and neighbors.

Opponents of the proposal claim adult stem cells already are being used to treat 73 diseases. In 40 years of adult stem-cell research, only a handful of treatments have won federal approval.

I was a researcher at the University of Michigan for six years in one of the top stem-cell biology labs in the world before I came to teach and do research at Grand Valley State University. Whenever there is a discovery, such as researchers finding skin cells can be reprogrammed to behave like stem cells, my family asks me whether embryonic stem-cell research still is necessary.

The answer is yes. Each therapeutic approach -- whether using embryonic, adult or other types of stem cells -- poses significant challenges to researchers before they can be safely used in people. Each disease offers different challenges that may be overcome using one type of stem cell therapy, but not another. We simply don't know which therapeutic approach will work for different diseases.

The ballot measure would give Michigan parents who use in-vitro fertilization the option of donating excess embryos for medical research instead of having them discarded as medical waste. In most states, including Ohio and Wisconsin, parents have this choice.

The measure also specifically prohibits the buying and selling of embryos. In effect, it strengthens Michigan's cloning ban.

Any research done in Michigan would be required to meet strict federal guidelines. This ballot proposal opens up research for Michigan scientists; it does not open up the rules governing that research.

I've seen talented scientists leave Michigan or abandon their research and go to states that recognize the importance of embryonic stem cell research. When we limit the ability to discover cures and treatment, we effectively deprive terminally ill patients of hope.

In November, members of my family who believe life begins at conception face a moral dilemma. In a society that routinely uses in-vitro fertilization and considers it a life-giving practice, embryos are being discarded. Do they vote to continue throwing those embryos away, or do they vote to use them to potentially alleviate human suffering and save lives?

Nationally-known conservatives, including former First Lady Nancy Reagan, U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah and presidential candidate John McCain, have concluded that supporting embryonic stem cell research is in fact the pro-life position.

Confronted with the suffering of millions of people with devastating diseases, our moral imperative is to help them.

Merritt K. Taylor is an assistant professor of biomedical sciences and cell and molecular biology at Grand Valley State University.