

The State News (MSU)

Stem cell research could appear on November ballot

March 30, 2008

BY ZACK COLMAN

The fate of embryonic stem cell research in Michigan might rest in voters' hands if a grassroots campaign collects enough signatures by July 7.

The Stem Cell Research Ballot Question Committee needs 380,126 signatures by its July deadline to put embryonic stem cell research on the November ballot. The proposal would be a state constitutional amendment allowing the donation of embryos produced in fertility clinics that would otherwise be thrown away. It would maintain that cloning is an illegal act

Embryonic stem cells differ from other stem cells because they can become any sort of cell after being extracted, said Jon Miller, an MSU John A. Hannah Professor of Integrative Studies and political expert in the stem cell research field. Embryonic stem cell research would assist scientists in uncovering how this copying mechanism functions, he said.

There is no federal ban on embryonic stem cell research, but current state laws significantly restrict the practice.

The most commonly used form of stem cells are adult stem cells, which are extracted from tissues, are rare and small in number. The scarcity of adult stem cells is problematic because large quantities are needed for replacement therapy, according to National Institutes of Health.

Ed Rivet, legislative director for Right to Life of Michigan, said he doubts the campaign will receive enough signatures because of its grassroots nature. If it does appear on the ballot, Rivet said he worries about leaving a decision about a complex issue to the people.

“That’s part of the problem with the issue being this complicated,” he said. “How can we provide enough information for the public to make an informed decision?”

Richard Cole, a Stem Cell Research Ballot Question Committee board member and professor and chairman of the MSU Department of Advertising, Public Relations and Retailing, said the issue is easier to fathom than opponents make it seem.

“I have enough faith in the population that they can solve something as simple as this,” Cole said. “It’s a Dumpster or laboratory. Dumpster or laboratory? You do the math.”

Rep. John Stakoe, R-Highland Township, served on the Michigan House Judiciary Committee that heard testimony related to embryonic stem cells. Among other reasons, he said adult stem cells are suitable because scientists at the University of California, Los Angeles, recently converted human skin cells into embryonic cells.

“All the successes have come from adult stem cells or (umbilical) cords,” Stakoe said. “I can’t find any evidence that substantiates embryonic stem cells lead to any sort of cures.”

While scientists have several ways to use stem cells, Miller said embryonic stem cells are the “Rosetta Stone of life.”

Stakoe, however, said he prefers to use adult stem cells because of the scientific research that already exists.

“We’re doing a disservice to people who are ill and are receiving false messages regarding the potential of embryonic stem cells,” he said.

Opponents aren’t only concerned about the science. Rivet said that since it would be a constitutional amendment, he also is wary of how it would be interpreted.

Despite Rivet’s concerns, Cole and Miller said America looks like a backward nation in the stem cell debate.

“We are the only people saying, ‘Maybe we should shoot ourselves in the foot and let somebody else research it and then we can pay them for it,’” Miller said.