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Proposal 2 could expand MSU stem cell research

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MSU is moving forward with plans to take full advantage of the potential benefits of Proposal 2, which eases state restrictions on embryonic stem cell research.

“It really has a sizable impact on the research enterprise of the university,” said James Ian Gray, vice president for research and graduate studies. “There’s a number of things we have to do and do somewhat quickly.”

“At the moment, we don’t have a formal institute or entity that’s actually dedicated to human embryonic stem cell research — we take a decentralized approach,” Gray said. “We have people who could work in that area that cross many colleges.”

In 1987, MSU professors James Trosko and Chia-Cheng Chang were the first researchers to isolate a human adult stem cell. The adult stem cells are taken from a consenting patient, as opposed to an embryo.

Despite the changes in Michigan law, Trosko doesn’t foresee any significant changes to his research.

“The state of Michigan is hurting economically,” he said. “The fact that we can now do human embryonic stem cell research does not necessarily mean there’s going to be an influx of scientists who will come to Michigan just to do this kind of research.”

David Doyle, spokesman for Michigan Citizens Against Unrestricted Science and Experimentation — Proposal 2’s opposition campaign — said he also doesn’t expect MSU to be significantly affected by the change.

“Adult and embryonic stem cell research was legal in Michigan and ongoing the day before the election and it’s still legal the day after the election,” Doyle said. “It comes down to funding, and unless there’s funding, it really doesn’t have any change.”

MSU receives partial funding for stem cell research from national and federal sources, such as the National Institute of Health, or NIH. Under President Bush, the institute provides funding for embryonic stem cell research under the condition that only the federal lines of embryos are used.

Stem cell lines are a population of cells harvested from a human embryo that are able to replicate themselves. Bush has forbidden the creation of new embryos and new stem cell lines during his presidency.

Many have speculated that President-elect Obama will reverse those policies, allowing more embryo lines to be created.

“To use human embryonic stem cells with federal funds, one still has to follow Bush’s guidelines,” Trosko said. “The rumor I heard is that Obama wants to overturn the presidential order on the use of human embryonic stem cells with federal funds.”

Gray said MSU will continue to explore other ways to get funding, such as from private donations. In the meantime, the university is still considering what direction it wants to take.

“We’re working with the deans to establish what strengths we have and where we plan to move in the future — that’s already underway,” Gray said. “The question is whether we bring in more research and push our NIH commission at the university for embryonic stem cell research. That’s certainly another option for MSU, absolutely.”