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Michigan needs rational law for stem cell research

Bill Frist's guidelines are blueprint for state law

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Michigan's law regarding stem cell research is outdated. Without a new version, state universities will be unable to stay current with their peers in other states, and Michigan may miss out on what could become a booming medical industry.

The existing state law was passed in 1978 and bans research on live fetuses and embryos. At the time of its passage, no embryonic stem cell research was being done, so its impact was not fully realized.

Today, however, scientists believe embryonic stem cells hold the key to significant breakthroughs in diseases and ailments ranging from paralysis to diabetes.

Michigan lawmakers have started discussions on reshaping the 1978 law, which is one of just four in the country that bans all forms of embryonic research. In doing so, they should be guided by the principles spelled out by Sen. Bill Frist, R-Tenn., the Senate majority leader and a physician.

Frist breaks rank with the hard-line pro-life wing of his party in offering a stem cell compromise that is not only right at the federal level, but would also serve Michigan well.

What Frist recommends:

- Ban the creation of embryos solely for research purposes. Scientists would only be allowed to use frozen embryos left over from the in vitro fertilization process, and only those that would have been discarded anyway.
- Make sure any bill clearly bans all forms of human cloning, and prevents the creation and exploitation of life for research purposes.
- Increase funding for adult stem cell research, while providing funding for studying embryonic stem cells.
- Demand a rigorous informed consent process to ensure that potential donors know precisely how the embryos will be used and are aware of other options, including adoption of the embryo.
- Require ongoing, independent scientific and ethical review, and bring up the law for

renewal after five years.

These are reasonable guidelines that Michigan policymakers ought to use to forge a more rational stem cell research law.

The University of Michigan has thousands of donated embryos it can't use for research because of the state law. As a result, the university is losing scientist who must go elsewhere to pursue their work.

Stem cell research has the potential to better the lives of Michigan residents and give the state another option for diversifying its economy.

Lawmakers should follow the Frist guidelines and fashion a law that allows this important research to go forward in a humane and ethical way.