

# The Detroit News

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## **Stem cell ban hurts Michigan**

*Prohibition on embryonic research repels best medical minds from state*

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One hundred years ago, Michigan's economy was the envy of the world. Inventors and entrepreneurs were flocking here from all over the world to start their businesses, make their fortunes and change the world.

Today people, companies and industries are fleeing the state. We desperately look to recapture some of the magic we created at the turn of the last century.

History can repeat itself. But I'm very concerned that in one critical respect we may be our own worst enemy -- with the restrictions the state puts on medical research.

### **Build on medical legacy**

Examining our past success, the first names that come to mind are the likes of Ford, Olds, Sloan and Durant. But to help chart our future, I suggest we focus on a different set of high-achieving Michiganians: William Upjohn, Herbert Dow, Hervey Parke and George Davis.

We tend to overlook it, but at the same time we were putting the world on wheels at the turn of the last century, we were leading a revolution in chemistry, science and medicine.

Dow Chemical, founded in Midland in 1897, was extracting bromine from our soil. Upjohn, founded in Kalamazoo in 1886, was perfecting the first large-scale production of cortisone. Parke-Davis, founded in Detroit in 1886, was conducting clinical trials in the first modern pharmaceutical laboratory in the world, creating the first bacterial vaccines.

With all due respect for my friends in the auto industry (who make terrific cars and trucks), if lightning is going to strike twice for our state, it's far more likely to be in science than manufacturing. The frontiers of biotechnology and life sciences have never been more promising. And we have much of the formula for success in place: great research universities; abundant natural resources (especially the essential and increasingly precious element of water); and a talented work force anxious to get back on the job.

### **Scientists scared away**

Unfortunately, at a time we should be welcoming the 21st-century's best minds, we've hung "Scientists do not enter" signs on our borders. Michigan boasts one of the most inhospitable environments in the nation for cutting-edge medical research. My friends in the medical community (at 83, I'm one of their best customers) tell me that it's becoming increasingly difficult to recruit young chemists and medical researchers to our universities.

Why? In part, because embryonic stem cell research is essentially illegal in Michigan. Our researchers are permitted to work with stem cells from the tissue of adults, children, umbilical cords and developing fetuses. But the vast majority of scientists agree that stem cells from embryos, with the ability to reproduce themselves into any one of hundreds of cells found in the human body, hold the greatest promise.

The amazing medical breakthroughs made possible by embryonic stem cell research -- with the potential to improve the quality and length of our lives -- will happen somewhere else if Michigan continues to opt out.

For example, I'm funding promising research at the University of Michigan to find a cure for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Some of the highest incidence rates in the world of this devastating disease are found right here in Michigan. But much of the work directed by the U-M research team

has to be done in California, where there is access to new lines of embryonic stem cells from fertility clinic patients who have voluntarily donated their left-over embryos rather than have them discarded as medical waste.

Under current state law, if this critical work were done in a U-M laboratory, the scientists could be sent to prison for up to 10 years and be fined up to \$10 million.

### **Out of the mainstream**

We're really out of step with mainstream scientific and political thought on this issue. No lesser an authority than the National Institutes of Health encourages the pursuit of embryonic stem cell research, along with the less controversial work being done with adult stem cells.

Now, I know that this is an emotional issue. The question of when a viable human life begins is a very personal matter, but so is the question of denying you or a loved one life-saving medical treatments and cures.

It may seem insensitive to have this debate in the context of jobs and economics. But as a state at risk, we need to have an honest, dispassionate examination of the facts, risks and rewards. Beliefs on all sides are heartfelt and deserve our fullest respect.

So let's have the discussion -- from Grand Rapids to Detroit -- and see if we can't craft the most ethical and effective stem cell research regulations in the nation. If our legislators lack the political will to tackle this in Lansing, let's put the question to the voters in November 2008.

Michigan is in a global race just like the one Ford and Sloan, as well as Upjohn, Dow, Parke and Davis, helped Michigan win 100 years ago. And the rewards -- in both economic and human terms -- are far, far greater.

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