

October 25, 2008

Editorial: For stem-cell research

NOBODY would deny that the choice of the next president is critically important, especially now. But next to that, the most crucial thing on the Michigan ballot is Proposal Two, which would allow sensible and safe embryonic stem-cell research.

Approval of Proposal 2 offers potential hope for millions of sufferers from everything from multiple sclerosis to spinal cord injuries. It would enable the state to attract top-notch scientists and the high-tech jobs of the future, and possibly have enormous long-term economic benefits. It deserves strong and enthusiastic support from Michigan voters.

Unfortunately, Proposal 2's opponents have mounted one of the most expensive and fraudulent advertising campaigns in state history, in an attempt to confuse voters as to what this proposal is actually about. They claim, falsely, that it would cost the state money, that it would allow for "unregulated experimentation," and open the door to human cloning, and most bizarrely, the creation of man-animal hybrids. All of those arguments are essentially lies. All that Proposal 2 would do is allow the voluntary donation of excess embryos produced by fertility clinics, which always produce more than needed.

These are not babies or even fetuses, nor would they ever become babies. They are tiny balls of no more than 180 undifferentiated cells. If not used for research, they all would be destroyed. But if their stem cells are used for good, they have the potential to enable scientists to learn how to replace nearly any form of damaged human cells with healthy tissue. Embryonic stem-cell research in Toronto already has shown great promise for rolling back macular degeneration, among other diseases. Both John McCain and Barack Obama have said they would loosen restrictions on federal funding of stem-cell research. But Michigan has the most backward laws forbidding embryonic stem-cell research of any major state in the nation.

Contrary to opponents' claims, Proposal 2 has plenty of built-in safeguards. Only embryos donated by the couple seeking fertility treatments are allowed to be used, and they cannot be more than 14 days old. The proposal forbids the buying and selling of embryos, and human cloning remains strictly illegal.

If Proposal 2 does not pass, the state will find itself losing what top-notch research biologists it still has; renowned scientists like Sean Morrison, director of the University of Michigan's Center for Stem Cell Biology, are almost certain to leave for a state that embraces modern science. Without approval of Proposal 2, Michigan also would find it increasingly hard or impossible to recruit the new high-tech and new- economy businesses the state desperately needs, as it struggles to invent a post-automotive economy.

On every level, voting YES on Proposal Two is the right choice to help move Michigan into the 21st century.