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Op-Ed: Stem cells likely biggest issue in Nov.

BY JACK LESSENBERRY

LANSING -- The stage is set for an epic battle at the polls this November that may determine Michigan's future. And it doesn't involve a single candidate for office.

But it might be this year's most important contest of all. Michigan voters are all but certain to be asked to amend the state constitution and the state's ban on embryonic stem cell research.

That is certain to have scientific and ethical implications -- but also economic ones as well. Supporters of stem cell research can envision the University of Michigan or Grand Rapids' Van Andel Research Institute as places where cutting-edge research is done.

Eventually, supporters can easily imagine people coming from around the world to the U-M hospitals for stem-cell treatments for everything from Parkinson's disease to macular degeneration.

Supporters of CureMichigan, a pro-stem cell research group, turned in more than 570,000 signatures to the Secretary of State last week. Though they have yet to be checked and certified, that is far more than the number needed to win a place on the ballot.

To Sean Morrison, director of the University of Michigan's Center for Stem Cell Research, that was welcome news that couldn't have come too soon. Thanks to the influence of Right To Life and its allies in the Legislature, Michigan has had some of the nation's most restrictive laws banning stem cell research. That has made it hard for Morrison to recruit and keep top-notch faculty.

Those boosting the state's effort to attract high-tech, new-economy jobs also worry that they will be doomed to failure if Michigan continues to have medieval laws blocking perhaps the most exciting and promising area of scientific research.

"How do you work with your hands tied behind your back?" Morrison has said. He has been doing research on stem cells taken from umbilical cords, but he said flatly they were not as good as embryonic stem cells, despite propaganda to the contrary.

President George W. Bush has banned federal funding for most embryonic stem cell research, but that ban's days are widely seen as numbered. The records of both John McCain and Barack Obama indicate they are much more open to stem cell research. California has ignored the ban, and its citizens have voted billions to fund work that many scientists agree is biology and modern medicine's future.

However, not everyone agrees. A powerful coalition of Roman Catholics and Christian fundamentalists have formed a group determined to defeat the measure. It is called MI-CAUSE (Michigan Citizens

Against Unrestricted Science and Experimentation.) David Doyle, the anti-stem cell research group's spokesman, told the Associated Press he fears this would open the door to human cloning. He charged the constitutional amendment "allows unrestricted and unregulated experimentation on human embryos." But that is nonsense, said State Rep. Andy Meisner, (D-Ferndale.) He has been one of Michigan's most outspoken supporters of stem cell research, and has been frustrated that his attempts to legalize it have been blocked in the Legislature.

"There is already a law against human cloning. In fact I tried to toughen that law. And embryonic stem cells are not obtained through abortions," he noted. They are, in fact, obtained from excess embryos that fertility clinics would otherwise discard.

The fall campaign is expected to be both emotional and expensive. MI-CAUSE is really mainly a combination of the Michigan Catholic Conference and Michigan Right to Life, who are expected to pour a lot of money into trying to defeat the stem cell research initiative.

Those supporting stem cell research are likely to be more dependent on individual contributions. Larry Owen, a former Democratic gubernatorial candidate who chaired the ballot drive, said supporters spent nearly \$2 million just to get enough signatures.

Watch for this to be one of the most expensive ballot campaigns in Michigan history. If it fails, embryonic stem cell research is bound to continue, in California and, increasingly, other states. Michigan, however, will lose out on the action, and the state's brain drain is all but certain to intensify.

Okay, so I was wrong: Working mostly by himself, clipboard in hand in front of the Royal Oak post office, Jack Kevorkian did manage to collect more than 3,000 signatures in his bid to be on the ballot as an independent candidate for Congress.

That left Democrats dismayed. He has no chance to win, and this normally would not matter much. But the 80-year-old apostle of assisted suicide is running in one of the two mostly hotly contested districts in the state.

Democrats plan to spend millions in their bid to knock off aging U.S. Rep. Joe Knollenberg (R-Troy) with former state lottery commissioner Gary Peters. The Republicans have millions to spend, too. Democrats fear that whatever few votes Dr. Death siphons off, largely from head-bangers and wacky college students, would otherwise have gone to their man.

If the former pathologist were to go to Washington, however, it would mean a workout for the parole board, which needs to give permission each time he leaves the state.