



Forum: Stem-cell research helps patients

By MEL LESTER

As founder of the only adult stem cell bank of its kind in Michigan, I support adult stem cell research and believe it is vital in the effort to heal and treat patients.

I also believe Michigan must pursue all forms of stem cell research -- adult and embryonic -- in the fight to save lives.

The fact is adult stem cells can only be used in highly specific, limited circumstances. Blood cells can only be used to treat blood-related diseases. Corneal cells can only be used in the cornea.

To repair cells damaged by incurable diseases and injuries such as diabetes, Parkinson's, cancer and spinal cord injuries, patients' best hope are cells that can become any tissue in the body -- embryonic stem cells.

Unfortunately, some people are spreading misinformation about this important research. They say adult stem cells alone can heal patients. Their arguments are driven by ignorance, not facts.

As a doctor who has devoted a significant part of his professional life to working closely with adult stem cells, I strongly believe we need every weapon in our arsenal -- including adult and embryonic stem cells -- to fight incurable diseases and injuries.



For children with juvenile diabetes, quadriplegics immobilized by spinal cord injuries and people shut down by Parkinson's disease, embryonic stem cell research offers the best hope at unlocking the door to elusive cures and treatments.

Michigan patients and their families deserve honesty and the facts, not lies such as the absurd claim that adult stem cells have led to more than 70 treatments.

This is untrue.

Adult stem cell research began nearly half-a-century ago -- and seven treatments have been approved, primarily for blood cell diseases.

Seven.

In comparison, embryonic stem cell research began 10 years ago. Already, U.S. scientists are reporting promising breakthroughs that could one day lead to cures and treatments for diabetes, heart diseases, strokes and spinal cord injuries. Clinical trials are set to begin within a year.

None of this research is happening in Michigan, even though we have some of the world's best medical researchers and institutions. Michigan law bans couples from donating leftover embryos to research, and it punishes researchers who work on new embryonic stem cell lines best suited for research.

Yet Michigan law allows fertility clinics to throw away leftover, unused and unusable embryos that could otherwise be donated to research. This is senseless. Michigan law doesn't save a single embryo from destruction -- it only delays the search for cures.

The fact is embryonic stem cell research will be conducted under the strictest federal and state guidelines and follow rigorous ethical and medical standards. And Michigan's ballot proposal on embryonic stem cell research keeps in place Michigan's ban on cloning and other stringent state- and local-level ethical and medical safeguards. Opponents of embryonic stem cell research should be honest with Michigan citizens and stop spreading unfounded, unscientific and untrue claims.

Michigan must perform both adult and embryonic stem cell research to bring hope to countless patients and their families.

About the author: Dr. Mel Lester is a founder of the J.P. McCarthy Cord Stem Cell Bank at the Karmanos Cancer Institute in Detroit. He is currently special assistant to the executive vice president of medical affairs at the University of Michigan. He lives part-time in Charlevoix.