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WILSON: Battle Over Stem Cell Research

(WXYZ) - There's an effort under way to change the state's rules on stem-cell research.

It's a home-grown battle for your vote and it's become every bit as contentious as the fight for the White House. We're talking now about the effort to amend Michigan's state constitution to allow some stem-cell research that's already legal in most other states.

Right out of the gate, opponents suggested Proposal 2 would cost Michigan taxpayers millions, then the other side said they were lying through their teeth...and so it's gone ever since, leaving voters pretty confused about the real issue that's at the heart of all this fighting.

It all started when the opponents went on TV suggesting if you vote YES, all of us Michigan taxpayers will end up shoveling millions of tax dollars into stem cell research. The other side blasted right back.

Commercial: You know that ad about stem cell research and taxes? Would the fact that it's lying through its teeth bother you?

Outright lying they said because Prop 2...

Commercial: Doesn't raise a single tax. Not one cent of taxpayer money.

True, so what is it that researchers want to do without your state tax money that is illegal in Michigan labs now?

Prof. Sean Morrison, PhD/University of Michigan: There are thousands of people in this state with diseases like juvenile diabetes or Parkinson's disease that one day may be treated more effectively as a result of embryonic stem cell research.

Wilson: Maybe.

Prof. Morrison: Maybe...but we're never going to find out if we don't do the research.

So just what is an "embryonic stem cell" anyway? Simply put, it's what a scientist can create from cells that develop after a human egg and a sperm are joined in a Petri dish in a lab. Although a woman supplies many eggs for the in-vitro fertilization process so common these days for men and women who cannot naturally conceive, not all of the fertilized eggs are ultimately implanted into the woman's uterus—many embryos are almost always routinely discarded.

Scientists everywhere but in Michigan, South Dakota, and Louisiana are using those leftover eggs to engineer lines of embryonic stem cells with the promising hope of finding new cures in many different areas of chronic disease and

injuries.

For example, Bob Klein? He has a young son with juvenile diabetes that has destroyed part of the boy's pancreas. He believes scientists one day may create from an embryonic stem cell, some new pancreas cells that would repair the damage and avert blindness, kidney loss, and other effects of diabetes. But a 30-year-old Michigan law makes it a crime now for Professor Morrison and every scientist in this state to create an embryonic stem cell that might do just that.

Prof. Morrison: We don't need money from the state, we just need to stop them to stop offering to put us in jail for doing the research.

So, Proposition 2 would write into the constitution of Michigan an amendment only to prohibit any law that would "...prevent, restrict, obstruct, or discourage..." any permitted stem cell research or therapies-and-cures," or "create (any) disincentives" for what the amendment calls the most promising forms of medical research in this state. And it's not that opponents are against what researchers are doing now, they're just afraid they might not be able to stop some future research if Prop 2 passes.

State Sen. Tom George/R-Kalamazoo Co: Do you understand my question? Can you give me an answer to that question?

Opponent's like State Senator Tom George—who is a medical doctor—are loathe to admit it but nowhere in all of Proposal 2 does it call for any researcher to get a single state tax dollar.

Sen. George: This is not a bonding proposal that allocates money but if you're going to compete in this arena, you need to do that ... There's no way you're going to compete with California which borrowed \$6 billion to spend three. When U of M complains that it's lost researchers...

Wilson: That's not true... I was in California yesterday. I know what they did, do you?

Steve Wilson: And as for California taxpayers on the hook for billions out here where they can't really afford it either?

Stem cell research was so promising to them, they voted by a strong margin to create an "Institute for Regenerative Medicine" and sell \$3 billion worth of state bonds to fund new research at Stanford University and labs throughout the state.

Sen. George: Okay, I stand corrected on that. You got me there.

And remember Bob Klein? He's the California Institute's chairman of the board.

Bob Klein/Chairman, California Institute for Regenerative Medicine: This is an investment in the most important thing we have for our families' future, our families' health.

In California, the \$6 billion number includes 30 years worth of interest on the bonds...but the misleading ads don't stop there.

Commercial: Already scientists there want to recruit women and persuade them to sell their eggs. Is that really the cure Michigan needs right now?

But the unfertilized eggs they're talking about are used in a different kind of research that will still be banned here in

Michigan. Embryonic stem cell research here will use only embryos from fertilized eggs provided by willing donors...and Prop 2 already includes a specific ban on the purchase or sale of those.

Commercial: But Proposal 2 also opens the door for profit-driven corporations to exploit unrestricted embryo research in Michigan...

Opponents are not truthful when they suggest Prop 2 will allow unrestricted embryo research. It includes a pretty long list of specific restrictions, though not enough to satisfy everybody, and opponents like Sen. George are also urging defeat of the measure based on their disputed claim that no further, new restrictions on stem cell research could ever happen if Prop 2 passes now.

Sen. George (from Oct. 12, 2008 Spotlight On The News): Voters should vote no because this ties the hand of the legislature and gives this new industry a blanket protection from future oversight.

Not clear in any opposition ad is the fact that they're bankrolled largely by the Michigan Catholic Conference and others who make a right-to-life argument, a position that's been rejected by both presidential candidates and even some arch-conservatives like Sen. Orrin Hatch.

Sean Morrison: We have people out there who believe that organ transplantation is immoral, people who believe that blood transfusion is immoral and those people are free not to participate in those treatments if they don't want them but they don't have the right to say that you can't have those treatments if you need them.

Sen. George: This provision, if we put it into our constitution, we would not have the ability to oversee that and you can imagine that there might be areas where there might be some controversy...let's say the developers of the Internet had come to the legislature and said, "Look, we want to bring the Internet here, Michigan's going to be the home of it, but you need to shield it our Constitution from oversight." If they had said that 30 years ago, and it's going to bring jobs and it's going to make life great and it's going to be better, who would have foreseen that there were going to be problems with spam, with pornography? We passed a measure within the last year or so making it illegal to put autopsy pictures on the Internet because a family found some pictures. Privacy issues, interstate commerce, countless issues that came up after the Internet's inception, so the law changes over time, Steve, to recognize these new dilemmas as they arise, and we modify it as needed to fit the needs of the people... So why would we close the door?

But researchers say Michigan, with its antiquated law now, already leads the nation in tying the hands of researchers looking for new cures which isn't good for the health of Michigan families, nor the state's economy.

Prof. Morrison: There's about 20 people in my lab and they...come from all over the world to train to do stem cell research, but whereas the same people when they go to Boston or New York or Los Angeles or San Francisco, those people often end up staying in those places and starting biotech companies or starting their own laboratories in universities. Here, almost all those people leave.

Wilson: Why?

Morrison: Because it's not as hospitable of an environment. These kinds of laws have a generally chilling effect on the life sciences center because the whole world can see that you can't count on Michigan to have rational legislation in this area, whereas every other state that's serious about having life sciences and pharmaceutical industries have passed stem-cell friendly laws, Michigan has gone in the other directions

Bob Klein: You've already lost thousands of jobs with Pfizer. That's only the beginning. If in fact you have one of the most regressive policies in the entire country, a policy of religious intolerance that is denying families access to future

therapies for their families, the best scientists will leave. The best physicians will leave, along with companies. That's not in the interest of your families or mine because we desperately need Michigan's great scientists to advance medical research for all of our families' benefit, for our future benefit, and for the jobs that Michigan really needs and can contribute to our country and the world in reducing human suffering.

And back to the opponent's argument that sooner or later Michigan taxpayers are going to be asked for money?

Sen. George: So sure, if you want to spend hundreds of millions of dollars we can recruit more researchers to Michigan but the fact is we don't have those resources today.

Prof. Morrison: You know, nothing that Tom just said and nothing that appears in their ads has anything to do with Prop 2.

Back in San Francisco, Bob Klein says while Californians voted to invest their tax money out there...here in the Great Lakes state:

Bob Klein: You're not being faced with that decision. The only decision in Michigan is whether to allow research that would be allowed by the federal government. So you're being put forth a conservative option of just allowing what the federal government allows and that means that Michigan could also receive federal research aid, coming into the state.

Wilson: And that research could go on.

Klein: And that research could go on and with that research going on, instead of companies like Pfizer leaving Michigan, you could keep research jobs and biotech jobs in Michigan, really high value jobs that are important to every state's economy.

One of the opposition's latest TV ads suggests this proposition might open the door to human cloning. Experts agree this kind of research has nothing to do with that. Cloning is already illegal in Michigan and elsewhere. Prop 2 does nothing to change that.