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## Embryos power U-M stem cell research

University begins accepting donations, gets FDA OK for first Lou Gehrig's disease study

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*The Detroit News*

The University of Michigan will now be accepting donated human embryos to create embryonic stem cell lines, launching research aimed at improved treatments for diseases, researchers said Tuesday.

The announcement means that U-M can begin long-awaited research on incurable illnesses like Lou Gehrig's disease. State restrictions on such research were lifted last year when voters approved a constitutional amendment.

It already has put Michigan in the stem cell spotlight, academically and economically, as U-M joins a small class of other universities nationwide that are creating stem cell lines to do ground-breaking science. But it comes as some lawmakers are trying to pass bills to add parameters that some say would stymie the progress the state has made.

"This is the beginning of a new era," said Eva Feldman, a U-M researcher and neurologist.

For years, proponents of stem cell research tried to change Michigan's law, among the most restrictive in the nation. But the effort dragged on since it was rebuffed by those who view embryonic stem cell research as immoral for the destruction of embryos created through in-vitro fertilization that are no longer needed.

After voters approved the constitutional amendment in November 2008, residents began asking U-M how they could donate their frozen embryos left over from in-vitro fertilization. But the university needed to develop a consent process and get it approved by university committees before the work could begin.

"We wanted to do it right," said Gary Smith, co-director of the U-M Consortium for Stem Therapies, which joins a handful of universities nationwide creating stem cell lines.

### 'Unprecedented potential'

Since the vote, \$6.8 million in federal stimulus dollars have been awarded to Michigan stem cell researchers. Detroit was selected as the site for the 2010 World Stem Cell Summit, a global gathering of researchers, entrepreneurs and policymakers. The Food and Drug Administration also approved the first clinical trial of stem cells involving humans with Lou Gehrig's disease to be overseen by Feldman.

"I am convinced (stem cell research) is one of the best opportunities to attract investment, create jobs and emerge from this recession with a revitalized economy," said A. Alfred Taubman, who invested millions into passing the constitutional amendment and the U-M Consortium for Stem Cell Therapies after watching a friend die from Lou Gehrig's disease. "It also has unprecedented potential to cure diseases that affect millions of people around the world. But there are people who want to undo the progress we've made."

Today, a Senate subcommittee is poised to vote on a package of bills that proponents say would add definition to the constitutional amendment. Opponents say it would gut the will of the people.

That's not true, said Sen. Tom George, R-Kalamazoo, and head of the Senate Health Policy Committee.

George says the package makes the amendment clearer and includes penalties and fines for violating the law. He added the laws are necessary for the private sector conducting stem cell research since it is not bound by federal guidelines.

"Vagaries in the law are no good for anyone," said George.

Feldman, the keynote speaker Tuesday at a Detroit Economic Club luncheon at the Westin Book Cadillac in Detroit, said the bills would limit researchers to only being able to create and freeze stem cell lines. If the bills were passed, researchers could not work on incurable diseases or other research that could lead to better therapies for people suffering from diseases such as juvenile diabetes, dementia and Parkinson's.

It took months for U-M to be ready to create its first embryonic stem cell lines, which are constantly dividing cells originating from a stem cell, because the work needed to be approved by two university committees.

## Life sciences sector growing

The state is taking steps to diversify the economy, Feldman said. She also noted that the life sciences sector in Michigan over a seven-year period grew 10.7 percent while manufacturing declined 24.7 percent. "There's excitement, there's investment in stem cell research," said Feldman.

Kathleen Russell, who has suffered from Parkinson's nearly 12 years, said 40,000 people also suffer from the debilitating movement disorder.

But her faith taught her that a mustard seed can move a mountain, she said.

"For us, embryonic stem cells are indeed smaller than a mustard seed," said Russell, an Ann Arbor resident who attended the luncheon to support continued stem cell research in Michigan.

"But it has the scientific power to move mountains."

## Additional Facts

To donate

For information on donating human embryos to U-M, visit <http://stemcellresearch.umich.edu>.