



Home | Stories | Columns | Submissions | Contact | Archives | Community

[Upcoming Events]

[Announcements]



Stories

Michigan stem cells laws destructive to “U” by Matt Pianko and Amanda Barone [Karma: 1 (+/-)]

What does Michigan have in common with Arkansas, Louisiana, North Dakota and South Dakota?

More than you would think, especially in the field of stem-cell research. According to an article from TIME published May 23, 2005: “Seven states restrict research, including Michigan, which prohibits it on live embryos, making any cutting-edge work all but impossible, and Louisiana, which specifically protects embryos created by in vitro fertilization.”

One would never guess that, despite the fact that Michigan has some of the most restrictive stem-cell research laws in the country, a recent poll conducted by the Marketing Research Group for Inside Michigan Politics found that seventy-three percent of Michiganders support this research. It is time to take action to remove the unnecessary restrictions on research that could save lives and improve the future of many who suffer from diseases like Parkinson’s disease, spinal cord injuries, juvenile diabetes, and a number of other illnesses.

Last fall, President Mary Sue Coleman aided in establishing the Center for Stem Cell Biology, a division housed here at U-M in the Life Sciences Institute complex. Future research held in this facility could invite the expansion of Michigan’s life-science industry, a move that could help reverse the recent downward spiral of Michigan’s economy. Funded by a ten million dollar allocation from U-M, renowned adult stem-cell researcher Sean Morrison will spearhead the recruiting of faculty and development of the Center for Stem Cell Biology. However, under the current laws in Michigan, the hope of bringing star researchers to do embryonic stem-cell research in Ann Arbor is an unlikely dream.

Major job cuts at the Big Three (Ford, General Motors, and DaimlerChrysler) are disheartening symptoms of Michigan’s failing economy, and they highlight the need to attract new lifeblood into the state’s economy. In a move that underscored the legal deterrents that keep the life-science industry away from Michigan, Governor Granholm addressed the promise of stem-cell research in her State of the State address, calling for legislators to lift the restrictions currently in place. Especially in an election year when she is up for reelection, Granholm should be praised not only for recognizing the future medical treatments stem cells might eventually bring to Michigan’s suffering patients but also for recognizing their potential to provide a promising avenue of new high-paying research jobs for Michigan’s economy.

It is important for us, as students at a university that is already a leader in adult stem-cell research, to understand the facts and the situation surrounding stem cells. It is not illegal to do embryonic stem-cell research in Michigan, but scientists are forbidden by law from deriving their own stem-cell lines in Michigan. Also illegal is the process of therapeutic cloning, a process that has the potential to create patient-specific stem cells for future medical treatments. These laws that restrict embryonic stem-cell research were passed in 1998, in response to the hysteria that ensued after the international news that UK



researcher Ian Wilmut had cloned Dolly the sheep. Under intense pressure from pro-life activists, the Michigan Legislature pushed through these laws that limited research on stem cells before their potential had been realized by anyone.

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In the words of U-M English Professor John Rubadeau, "Ain't [sic] that great that we are on the same level as a 'progressive' state like Louisiana? What next? Will a third world country, not constrained in its medical research by religious fanaticism, lure Michigan's best minds away from Ann Arbor?"

Prominent researchers have indeed already left Michigan for greener pastures in the stem-cell world. Last fall, Michael Clarke, co-discoverer of the fundamental role that defective stem cells play in maintaining cancer, left U-M's medical school to pursue stem-cell research at Stanford University. With a recent \$3 billion bond proposal to publicly fund stem-cell research, California can boast of having the country's most permissive environment for stem-cell research. U-M has made many landmark advances in adult stem-cell research, and with its new Center for Stem Cell Biology has the potential to make many more groundbreaking discoveries. Unless Michigan acts quickly to reform its present stem-cell laws, other states like California or New Jersey, or institutions like the University of California-San Francisco or "The Michigan of the East" in Massachusetts might lure away the 'leaders and best' in stem-cell research.

Opponents of stem-cell research argue that, regardless of the stage of development, embryos should not be destroyed for any reason, and that any research that does so is therefore always a moral wrong. Most Americans reject this position, and fail to see anything human about frozen blastocysts, which have not yet begun to differentiate into the tissues that make people human. Human life begins in the womb of a mother, and not in a plastic Petri dish.

According to a recent editorial in the Lansing State Journal, "Opponents of stem-cell research claim the promise of this research is a fallacy; that the research has failed to find medical cures. That's like saying that since we haven't found evidence of extraterrestrial life, the rest of the universe must be dead."

One can also argue that there are strong moral grounds to proceed with the research; if this research has the potential to cure so many diseases, it is ethically imperative that action be taken to advance the research to prevent unnecessary suffering. Furthermore, in the words of Richard O. Lempert, Director of U-M's Life Sciences, Values, and Society program, and Jack E. Dixon, Co-Director of the U-M Life Sciences Institute, "Under most ethical schemes, including many religious ones, helping fellow human beings is often an ethical imperative, and curing the sick is a classic example of what it means to help other people. A state that impedes or does not actively support attempts to heal illness is arguably acting immorally." The state of Michigan has a moral obligation to pursue this research in the interests of finding cures that would relieve suffering.

Class of 1995 U-M Alum and State Representative Andy Meisner (D-Ferndale) has sponsored two bills that would lift the current restrictions on stem-cell research and allow for embryonic stem-cell research to proceed unhindered in the state. They would allow scientists to derive their own stem cell lines from discarded embryos donated by in-vitro-fertilization clinics and use therapeutic cloning or somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) to derive stem-cell lines that are patient-specific. The bills would also increase the penalty to fifteen years in prison for doing reproductive cloning, the type of cloning meant to create human beings.

Rep. Meisner's bills have been largely ignored by the Republican leadership in the state. With 70 of 110 state representatives currently endorsed by Right to Life of Michigan, there is intense pressure to bend to the will of this powerful lobbying group, especially in an election year. It is imperative that the beliefs of a very small, yet extremely vocal and

über-powerful minority not dictate the course of our scientific research in the state of Michigan. Call, e-mail, or write your state representatives and urge them to support Representative Meisner's bills to lift the restrictions on stem-cell research. Find a comprehensive list of your state leaders on <http://www.house.mi.gov>.

If you are interested in this cause and the promise of stem-cell research, the Student Society for Stem Cell Research (SSSCR) is a new student group on campus devoted to educating people about stem-cell research, exploring what stem-cell research may hold for the future, and advocating for stem-cell research in the public sphere. E-mail ssscr-info@umich.edu for more information.

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