



Biotech gathering focuses on stem cell research

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By Julia Bauer

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GRAND RAPIDS -- The nationwide argument over embryonic stem cell research could melt with the first big disease-busting application, science writer David Duncan told a biotech crowd on a snowy Thursday morning.

Duncan, among the keynote speakers at MichBio Expo 2006 at DeVos Place, warned the group to recognize the potential damage of ongoing debates about stem cells and evolution.

"We need to get off the discussion of whether to have embryonic stem cells or not," said Duncan, a science journalist who appears on National Public Radio and has authored six books. "They're here. The real discussion is: Should they be developed in a closed society like China or an open society like America?"

That was just the first salvo in the stem cell controversy Thursday. Later, a seven-member panel shared a barrage of facts and frustration in dissecting the state's laws banning such research.

"It's a very strange situation in Michigan," science writer Eve Herold said. "It seems to want to promote a very vibrant biotech sector, but it has the most stringent laws on stem cell research."

Herold is with the Genetics Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., and just released her book, "Stem Cell Wars." In it, Herold devotes chapter eight to Michigan, titled "Hypocrisy and Health Care."

Michigan-based professionals on the panel were clearly frustrated with state laws that ban harming or cloning a human embryo. But advocates for the embryonic research said potential medical benefits for curing chronic diseases should outweigh the loss of the excess blastocyst.

Parents who turn to in-vitro fertilization typically have more embryos created than they require. In many states, those unused fertilized eggs can be donated to research if the parents agree.

But not in Michigan. It and South Dakota enforce the most severe limitations on stem cell research.

"Our state law only delays medical research from using those (stem cells) that otherwise are being thrown away," said Sean Morrison, a researcher at the University of Michigan.

Fresh lines of stem cells more readily could treat diabetes and other chronic diseases, identify hereditary illnesses and foster the development of drugs to treat them, he said.

Adult stem cells already are specialized, while embryonic cells are microscopically small clump of cells, able to grow into any cell in the body, Morrison said.

U.S. Rep. Joe Schwarz, R-Battle Creek, walked the crowd through the political facts of life for nationwide stem cell legislation that is regularly vetoed by President Bush. He forecast that embryonic stem cell research would not be expanded until early 2009, after Bush leaves office.

In the meantime, such research will be driven offshore, said Schwarz, a doctor who is a practicing otolaryngologist (an ear, nose and throat specialist).

"We'll be right there with South Dakota," he said.

Advances in the field may change the rules, though. An August report in Nature magazine described the

use of a single cell from an embryo to develop a new line of stem cells. That cell can be removed without destroying the embryo.

And, as Duncan forecasts, a blockbuster cure could create a groundswell of support for embryonic stem cell research.

Other procedures that faced opposition won broad public acceptance, including blood transfusions, organ transplants and in-vitro fertilization.

"When the first baby was born, it turned the tide," Herold said.

Van Andel Institute Chairman David Van Andel, who philosophically opposes using embryos for such research, did not weigh in on the topic in his opening speech Thursday. He led off the day by outlining the booming Health Hill growing along Michigan Street NW.

"We'll have more than \$1 billion invested in the next 10 years in life sciences," Van Andel said.

His other concern is boosting science and math education for youngsters and teens. MichBio included a high school career day and a session for college students.

More than 500 people came through the three-day event, which included 65 exhibitors and more than a dozen events.

The third-annual MichBio Expo will be in Lansing next fall.

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