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Stem cell research: 'No' to Proposal 2

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Proposal 08-2 on the November ballot would amend Michigan's Constitution to lift current restrictions on embryonic stem cell research. Supporters of the measure say it would bolster state research that could pave the way for cures and treatments for cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's and many other diseases.

That's a tempting prospect. But voters should reject the proposal because it would ban any state or local laws restricting embryonic stem cell research -- and, by implication, any ethical or safety regulation.

Proposal 2 supporters contend Michigan currently has some of the nation's most restrictive laws against such research. They say this results in unwanted embryos being thrown away when they could be used for life-saving research.

Backers insist the proposal has language guarding against abuses. For example, it says expanded research could use only embryos created for fertility treatment purposes (not derived from abortions) that would be discarded unless used for research. The measure also bars the buying or selling of embryos and provides that stem cells cannot be taken from human embryos more than 14 days after cell division begins.

Some voters already have decided to vote "no" on Proposal 2 because they simply oppose all embryonic stem cell research on moral grounds. But Proposal 2 should give pause even to voters who don't believe that way.

The reason is that the proposal's language would "prohibit state and local laws that prevent, restrict or discourage stem cell research, future therapies and cures."

What this means is that the Legislature cannot enact any restrictions on the research -- including safety or ethical rules on how the research is carried out. Such restrictions would require another constitutional amendment.

Is that wise, when problems that might not be foreseen now might arise? We think not.

And what does it mean to "discourage" stem cell research? That looks like an open invitation to lawsuits, with courts deciding the boundaries of what's permitted and what's not.

It's important to note that embryonic stem cell research, both privately and federally funded, already is taking place in Michigan. In fact, a center at the University of Michigan receiving federal funds now supports 40 researchers. Also legal in Michigan is adult stem cell research. What Proposal 2 would do would be to lift the prohibition against state-funded research using embryonic stem cells.

But clearly it would do much more than that.

We believe it's often unsound to tie the hands of future legislators through constitutional amendments. That principle certainly should apply to embryonic stem cell research. Voters should reject the unregulated expansion of research that Proposal 2 would allow.