

Published on the Detroit Free Press Website

Push is on to lift stem-cell research ban

Mich. voters may see issue in fall

By Dawson Bell
July 3, 2008

An amendment to the Michigan Constitution authorizing the destruction of human embryos in research aimed at curing chronic and debilitating illness appears headed for the November ballot after supporters collected more than 500,000 petition signatures.

Stay tuned for an expensive and highly visible in-your-face campaign. The Stem Cell Ballot Question Committee will submit between 500,000 and 550,000 signatures on Monday's deadline, well over the 380,000 needed to put the issue before voters, campaign director Mark Burton said Wednesday.

If approved, the proposal would lift Michigan's 30-year-old ban on scientific research that results in the destruction of an embryo, a ban blamed by some for impeding the development of stem-cell research in the state.

The amendment authorizes research using embryos created for use in fertility treatment but not needed to produce a pregnancy and likely to be discarded.

Backers say stem cells extracted from the embryos can be used to study disease and could lead to treatments for illnesses from Parkinson's to juvenile diabetes.

Two years ago, a constitutional amendment campaign to OK the use of embryos and cloned embryos in stem-cell research in Missouri attracted national attention with ads featuring actor Michael J. Fox, who has Parkinson's disease.

The advertising war cost more than \$30 million, most of it spent by proponents.

The proposed amendment would not affect Michigan's law banning cloning, as earlier legislative attempts to relax stem-cell research regulations would have done. That law was passed in 1998.

David Doyle, spokesman for a newly formed group called MI-CAUSE (Michigan Citizens Against Unrestricted Science and Experimentation), said the proposal has many loopholes, as well as hidden and unintended consequences. Ultimately, it could remove virtually all restriction and oversight for scientists working with embryonic stem cells, he said.

Doyle, a longtime Lansing political professional who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 10 years ago, said, "Everyone in Michigan wants to find cures; I know I certainly do. But science shouldn't be unrestricted."

Both proponents, many of them connected to the University of Michigan's stem-cell research programs, and opponents, led by Right to Life of Michigan and the Michigan Catholic Conference, have access to

significant resources.

U-M researchers have pushed for removal of Michigan's barriers to using embryos in stem-cell experiments for several years, arguing that the state's restrictions were among the most stringent in the country and were driving away talented scientists and research funding.

Opponents have countered that stem cells derived from sources other than embryos hold more promise, and don't require the destruction of what many people consider to be a nascent human being.

They were buoyed earlier this year by the announced discovery of a method to produce pluripotent stem cells from adult skin cells rather than embryos.

The pluripotent cells are considered key to developing treatments and were often cited previously as the main reason to pursue research using embryos.

Burton said the advocates for the ballot plan support research in both areas but believe embryonic stem cells offer the most hope for cures.

The proposal falls short of authorizing research using somatic cell nuclear transfer, or embryonic cloning, however.

Burton said campaign backers decided "we couldn't politically escape the label of cloning," about which voters remain deeply uneasy. The ban on cloning could be revisited once the general public becomes more familiar with the science, he said.

Doyle said the proposed amendment remains "very deceptive," giving the impression that it addresses cloning without doing so in any way. That has been typical of the way the proposal has been marketed, he said, with emotional but dishonest appeals to the desire everyone has to seek new cures for terrible illness.