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Michigan panel debates stem cell research bills

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Embryonic stem cell research supporters are worried that legislation debated in a state Senate committee Wednesday could threaten the progress of research in Michigan.

The bills discussed in the Senate Health Policy Committee would establish reporting requirements and penalties for violations related to Proposal 2, which Michigan voters approved in 2008. The measure loosened state restrictions on embryonic stem cell research by allowing people to donate embryos left over from fertility treatments.

Supporters of the new bills say lawmakers have a responsibility to define and clarify the constitutional amendment within state law. But stem cell research supporters said the proposals go too far and would violate a portion of Proposal 2 that says state law cannot prevent, restrict, obstruct or discourage stem cell research that otherwise would be permitted.

Laura Jackson, a Livonia woman who was paralyzed in a cheerleading accident several years ago and supported last year's stem cell proposal campaign, says the new measures would place too many restrictions on researchers and could force some out of state. She said it could threaten research that supporters say could lead to medical breakthroughs for spinal injuries and several diseases.

"I'm sorry this bill is even here," Jackson told lawmakers. "People already voted on this."

Researchers have said the proposals are burdensome, vague and serve no public purpose. The head of the University of Michigan's stem cell research program said the legislation contradicts the voter-approved measure.

"These bills would impede the development of the life sciences sector in Michigan by making it illegal to pursue mainstream forms of medical research that are widely accepted throughout the rest of the country," said Sean J. Morrison, director of the Center for Stem Cell Biology.

But some lawmakers defended the Legislature's right to detail and enact the broad amendment voted into the constitution.

"It's not only permissible, but it is required of us," said Sen. Bruce Patterson, a Canton Republican who is not sponsoring any of the bills.

The committee did not vote on the proposals Wednesday. Sen. Tom George, a Kalamazoo County Republican who chairs the committee and sponsors the main bill in the package, said he is seeking more input for the definitions and criteria that would be used in the state law.

"In the measure that was adopted, there are phrases that need to be defined," said George, one of the Republicans seeking his party's nomination to run for governor in 2010. "Adding clarity will help the public, it will help potential embryo

donors, it will help the researchers — it will help all of us understand exactly what we're talking about."

George said the legislation isn't an attempt to restrict or obstruct the voter-approved stem cell measure.

The voter-approved measure was opposed by Right to Life of Michigan and other groups in large part because it involves the use and destruction of human embryos. Critics of the proposal had warned that if it passed the state would have little power to oversee the research, but the bills considered in Wednesday's hearing would test that theory.

Right to Life supports the new legislation. A representative of the group said Wednesday that it is not an attempt to reverse Proposal 2 but rather to ensure its provisions are enacted within a regulatory framework.

The bills would put into state statute and give definition to some of the provisions in the constitutional measure. Embryos would have to be donated voluntarily and with consent; the embryos could not be bought or sold.

Additional steps would be required by the legislation debated Wednesday.

Researchers would have to file annual reports with the state detailing how many embryos they used for research, how many were thrown out unused and how many are in storage. The state Department of Community Health would compile an annual summary based on the researcher-provided information.

Precautions would be taken in reporting to protect the identities of embryo donors. Violators would be subject to a \$5,000 fine and a year in prison.

Facilities that handle in vitro fertilizations also would have to file reports with state health officials detailing how many embryos are created, implanted and donated for research.