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U-M lands stem cell research grants

The University of Michigan has received 13 federal stimulus grants worth \$6.8 million for stem cell research — a sign of the state's growing clout since voters last year eased restrictions in the emerging field that seeks treatments and cures for numerous diseases.

The Ann Arbor university released the findings this morning after analyzing about \$5 billion in grants awarded this year by the National Institutes of Health as part of the \$787 billion economic stimulus program. That is part of \$10.4 billion the NIH received from the program for grants that must be awarded by Sept. 30, 2010.

Sean Morrison, director of the university's Center for Stem Cell Biology, said the state and its leading institution for stem cell research raised their profiles since the passage last November of Proposal 2, which changed state law to allow people to donate embryos left over from fertility treatments for scientific research. He said the school's efforts also have been boosted by President Barack Obama's executive order earlier this year to end limits on using federal dollars for stem cell research. It reversed former President George W. Bush's Aug. 9, 2001 directive that banned federal funding for research into stem lines created after that date.

"The passage of Proposal 2 made it possible for millions of dollars in new resources to flow into the University of Michigan to be invested into ... stem cell research," Morrison said. The university is among the leading academic recipients for the stem-cell research grants, alongside Johns Hopkins University, University of Wisconsin, Harvard University and the California university system.

The grants are among more than 260 stimulus awards the University of Michigan has received to date from the National Institutes of Health in all areas. Overall, the state of Michigan has received 395 stimulus grants through the NIH, placing it ninth among states. University of Michigan's research uses adult and embryonic stem cells, as well as adult cells that have been reprogrammed to behave like embryonic stem cells.

Morrison was awarded \$744,000 to examine the potential of using human embryonic stem cells to develop a treatment for Hirschprung's disease, a birth defect related to the nervous system regulating intestinal function.

Other grant recipients include dentistry professor Russell Taichman, who received \$971,456 for a two-year study that will use reprogrammed adult stem cells to heal and restore facial and skull tissues following disease or trauma; and cardiovascular medicine professor Mario Delmar, who received \$500,000 to examine a type of cardiac stem cell involved in forming scars within the heart.

Many researchers and advocates say stem cells, which can turn into any organ in the body, hold promise for treatments and cures for cancer, diabetes, spinal cord injury and Lou Gehrig's disease. Critics oppose the destruction of human embryos and fear such work will not be properly regulated.

Morrison said the university has spent most of the past year since the passage of the proposal clearing the hurdles imposed by "rational" regulations stemming from the state and federal actions. The school has constructed new research laboratories and is hiring new faculty and researchers. He said the latest round of federal funding "really does stimulate biomedical research in important ways in this country." "Our ability to do research has really declined over the past 10 years, during the Bush administration," he said. "This new money coming into the system is really coming at an important time to reverse that decline."