

Bills to modify stem-cell amendment held up in Senate

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By [Jay Greene](#)

A package of six bills to modify Michigan's constitutional amendment that permits embryonic stem cell research appears to be stalled in the Senate because Majority Leader Mike Bishop is concerned the changes could lead to job losses and may not reflect voters' intent in voting for the amendment.

The bills, which researchers say would hurt the state's fledgling stem cell research industry, were narrowly approved Jan. 20 in the state **Senate Health Policy Committee** and sent to the Senate for action.

But Bishop has no plans to put the bills on the docket for a vote, said Matt Marsden, Bishop's spokesman.

"There is some concern that we be cautious about how we handle the issue because this was a ballot initiative approved by voters in a general election," Marsden said. "It is important that legislation not change the will of the people."

Marsden also said Bishop has concerns that the bills could cost the state jobs in the state's life sciences industry.

"The (Senate) leadership prefers the bills not to come up on the floor," said Joe Schwarz, M.D., chair of pro-stem cell research group **CureMichigan** and a former Republican congressman from Battle Creek. "They think it is bad public policy. I think the same thing."

But Sen. Tom George, R-Kalamazoo, chair of the health policy committee, said he believes there is a good chance the Senate would approve the bills if they did come up for a vote.

George, an anesthesiologist who is running for governor, also was chair of **Michigan Citizens Against Unrestricted Science and Experimentation**, a group opposed to the stem cell amendment.

"I told Bishop I wanted the bills to be on the floor for some time so that I would have time to educate my colleagues. Members need their concerns allayed," said George.

"I know that the opponents have mischaracterized the bills that somehow they would interfere with science and economic development," George said. "That is silly; none of the people testified in my committee about that."

George said that Sen. Bruce Patterson, R-Lansing, is working on additional changes to the bills to address concerns from universities. But Sean Morrison, director of the **University of Michigan's Center for Stem Cell Biology Research**, said the proposed bills would only discourage people who have undergone fertility treatments from donating unused embryos.

Jeffrey Loeb, M.D., associate director of the **Center for Molecular Medicine and Genetics at Wayne State University School of Medicine** in Detroit, said the Senate bills would undo the voter referendum.

“No researcher in their right mind would take on embryonic stem cell research in Michigan knowing that it could get them thrown in jail based on subtleties and legal wording of this bill,” Loeb said. “The bills create a rigid structure for research programs that need to be constantly changing and thus would prevent any future novel research efforts not anticipated in its wording.”

Schwarz said Michigan researchers have enough regulations and that the state does not need additional regulations on stem cell research.

For example, Schwarz said stem cell researchers must abide by a variety of regulations from the federal government, university and private institutional review boards, and professional associations.

“The ethical safeguards for appropriate stem cell research are many,” he said. “The IRB rules are far more stringent than the gobbledygook that is written in these bills.”

Michigan is one of nine other states that have passed legislation specifically permitting embryonic stem cell research. Michigan also is now one of three states that have approved constitutional amendments to allow the research. The other two are Missouri and California.

Scientists believe embryonic stem cell research could lead to cures for such debilitating diseases as diabetes, sickle cell anemia, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, heart attack, stroke, breast and prostate cancer and spinal cord injuries.

To read the bills, Senate Bills 647-652, visit the Michigan Senate Web site at legislature.mi.gov.