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New stem cell rules could aid Michigan

Jennifer Chambers and Maureen Feighan / The Detroit News

ANN ARBOR -- President Barack Obama is expected to sign an executive order today easing restrictions on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, an act that could benefit Michigan researchers greatly, one University of Michigan researcher said.

Sean Morrison, director of the University of Michigan's Center for Stem Cell Biology, said more money will be available for the research if Obama signs the order.

Michigan voters last year approved a measure that permits researchers to derive new stem cell lines from donated embryos left over from fertility treatments.

Supporters say the research holds the potential to improve medical treatments for diseases such as Parkinson's, cancer, and diabetes.

"When signed, President Obama's executive order will signal a new day in which science policy will be based on science and in which the federal government can invest in the best ideas with the greatest potential to improve public health," Morrison said. "America will once again seek to be the world's engine for biomedical discovery, leading the way toward new treatments for disease."

Liz Boyd, Gov. Jennifer Granholm's press secretary, also applauded the president. She said in approving Proposal 2 last fall, Michigan voters believe "as does the governor that stem cell research has the potential to save lives and prevent disease."

America's biomedical research enterprise experienced steady decline over the past eight years, Morrison said, with shrinking budgets and policies that elevated ideology over science. This slowed the pace of discovery and the search for cures, he said.

But Paul Long, vice president for public policy of the Michigan Catholic Conference, which spent millions fighting the statewide stem cell measure, called the executive order "very disappointing."

Research continues to show the power of adult stem cells, he said, and Obama's order essentially will give researchers "a blank check" for research millions of Americans oppose on moral grounds.

"The research continues to show that we do not need to be in the business of destroying human embryos," Long said.

On Nov. 4, Michigan voters overturned one of the nation's most restrictive laws on embryonic stem cell study and approved Proposal 2, a state constitutional amendment that permits Michigan researchers to derive new embryonic stem cell lines using surplus embryos from fertility clinics.

"Michigan voters approved Proposal 2 to loosen restrictions on embryonic stem cell research over the objection of opponents who claimed there would be no funding to support this research. President Obama's executive order means that the federal government will invest millions of dollars in new embryonic stem cell research," Morrison said.

Critics said Michigan's law had blocked research that could lead to cures and therapies for juvenile diabetes, cancer, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injuries and other maladies.

Opponents of Proposal 2 said there has not been a single cure as a result of embryonic stem cell research, while medical breakthroughs have been achieved using adult stem cell research, which is not restricted in Michigan. Some object to the destruction of embryos as part of the research.

Adult stem cell research has been around for more than 60 years, while embryonic stem cell research has only been around since 1998.

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