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Editorial: U-M strengthens research position

WHY IT MATTERS?

U-M's embryonic stem cell initiative is the kind of cutting-edge research that can elevate Michigan's life sciences industry as well as bring it federal dollars and national attention.

The University of Michigan is launching a new embryonic stem cell initiative that will put the state at the forefront of this cutting-edge biomedical research. The timing couldn't be better. President Obama has lifted restrictions on federal funding for this type of research. Michigan voters last year approved more robust embryonic stem cell research. The potential to produce life-saving medical breakthroughs is real and tantalizing.

Michigan is fortunate to have one of the nation's premiere research universities on the job. U-M is in a strong position to acquire new federal research dollars and make the state more competitive as a location for the life sciences sector.

This type of research comes with legitimate ethical and moral questions, involving deeply held religious beliefs and conflicting views about the treatment of human life in its earliest stages. A rigorous public discussion of those issues will no doubt continue. But Michigan citizens have made their wishes clear.

U-M recently announced the formation of a consortium to create embryonic stem cell lines to help in the pursuit of new treatments and cures for diseases. We all have a stake if benefits are realized from this research, regardless of our position. The state will benefit from a boost in its life sciences industry, which bodes well for efforts to diversify the economy. There are few universities deriving new embryonic stem cell lines or focusing, like U-M, on disease-affected lines. Early disease targets will include neurological conditions such as Lou Gehrig's disease, Huntington's and Alzheimer's, as well as diabetes.

The constitutional amendment approved in November allows research on human embryos and the creation of new embryonic stem cell lines. The measure overturned a 1978 law but leaves in place a law prohibiting human cloning techniques. The consortium will be using surplus embryos

following infertility treatment. Several hundred early stage embryos have been donated for research. These would otherwise have been discarded.

Mr. Obama will allow federal funding to be used for stem cell research on lines derived from embryos since 2001. Former President Bush had limited funding to research involving 21 stem cell lines created prior to that date. The A. Alfred Taubman Medical Research Institute Consortium for Stem Cell Therapies will be based at the U-M medical school, and work is expected to begin this spring.

U-M will be collaborating with other state research universities including Michigan State and Wayne State. That's encouraging. Sharing of resources will be valuable to those universities and help grow partnerships and accelerate efforts that ultimately benefit the state and nation.

The initiative is expected to lead to the recruitment of some of the best and brightest scientists in the field. The university is competing with states such as California and Massachusetts that have flourishing life science sectors. The consortium will complement U-M's Center for Stem Cell Biology, launched in 2005, as the university looks to bolster its research in the field.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH), the federal government's scientific grant-making organization, has 120 days to hammer out details of the new program. Grants can then be submitted to research the embryonic stem cell lines. The stimulus package dedicates \$10.4 billion to NIH.

The hope is that the expanded embryonic research will one day lead to cures for conditions Americans are afflicted with such as spinal cord injuries, juvenile diabetes and Parkinson's disease. Adult stem cells are currently the only type of stem cells commonly used to treat human diseases.

U-M has laid the necessary groundwork to make its research grant application for embryonic stem cell dollars very attractive. The University of Michigan is uniquely positioned to capitalize on this opportunity to advance important research and aid in life sciences, playing a bigger role in the state's economic turnaround.

That alone won't cure our economic ills. But it will help.