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MSU to apply for stem cell funding after ban lifted

BY: ALLISON BUSH

Following the lifting of a ban on federal funding for human embryonic stem cell research last week, MSU researchers could receive federal funding for their work for the first time in eight years.

President Barack Obama lifted the ban March 9, a move that will allow researchers to use embryonic stem cell lines that were not available under the Bush administration.

“Before, we were limited with the cell lines that were available for us to use,” said Jose Cibelli, an animal science and physiology professor. “Those lines were getting very old, and with this new lifting of the ban, we can apply for federal funding with any cell line.”

The \$787 billion federal stimulus package allocates for up to \$10 billion to be used for biomedical research, which could help fund stem cell research.

“Of course, there will be multiple institutions applying and the chances are not great, but we will apply,” Cibelli said.

Cibelli’s research focuses on taking adult stem cells, which already have been tagged for specific organs, and turning back their development to make embryonic stem cells from them.

“Still, we’re going to need some cell lines produced from embryos to be able to compare the stem cells,” he said.

Although researching embryonic stem cells could lead to cures for diseases such as diabetes and cancer, opponents say using an embryonic stem cell requires the taking of human life.

By deciding whether to engage in federally funded research, the university faces controversial ethical questions, said professor Leonard Fleck, an expert in ethical issues related to stem cell research.

“Harvesting the stem cells needed will be done with public dollars, and some of those dollars will come from right-to-life folks who are going to say they object vigorously to using their tax dollars to support this research they’re totally opposed to,” Fleck said.

The university will have to address these concerns and explain why research should go forward, along with explaining reasonable limits, he said.

Not all stem cell researchers will be affected by Obama lifting the ban.

James Trosko, a professor in MSU’s Department of Pediatrics and Human Development, studies human adult stem cells. These produce only the cell types of the organs they were isolated from, whereas embryonic stem cells will produce all human cell types.

“From that standpoint, we feel that it’s more important we work with stem cells that make types we want to study,” Trosko said. “Secondly, we don’t want to bother with the ethical, legal and religious implications.”

Cibelli said lifting the ban could strengthen collaborations with the University of Michigan, which announced the launching of a \$5 million embryonic stem cell research center the same day the ban was lifted.

Research at the U-M center is expected to begin this spring, and will focus on identifying goals that are not covered by national groups, said Doug Engel, chairman of U-M’s Cell and Developmental Biology Department.

“We’re attempting to identify unmet needs that we might uniquely contribute to,” Engel said.

“We’re at the beginning stages, but there’s at least one investigator at MSU that has been very forthcoming, and we hope to include.”