

Republicans seek limits on stem cell usage

By Ed Brayton 6/22/09 1:36 AM

Republicans in the state legislature are trying to pass a series of bills to sharply limit the use of embryonic stem cells in medical research. Among those is a bill that would set a rather meaningless definition in order to limit the number of blastocysts available to researchers from which to derive the stem cells:

For instance, the amendment says embryos created in fertility clinics may be used for stem cell research if they are not suitable for implantation. The proposed bill defines “not suitable” to mean the embryo exhibits characteristics that “make successful implantation and gestation of the human embryo less than 50 percent likely.”

This is a very bad idea. The whole purpose of last year’s constitutional amendment allowing the creation of new embryonic stem cell lines in the state was to make available those frozen blastocysts that were created for use in fertility treatments but not ultimately implanted. This new restriction would do two things:

A. It would significantly limit the number of new stem cell lines that could be created under the new law. This is because most fertilized embryos that are not implanted but are subsequently frozen for possible future use by the patient — and eventually destroyed — were not rejected because successful implantation and gestation were less than 50%.

It is routine when doing such treatments to fertilize all of the eggs produced by the woman and then, after a few days of observation of how they are developing, decide which one or two to implant in the woman’s uterus. The fact that many fertilized eggs were not implanted does not necessarily mean they would not have survived if they were implanted, only that they picked the one or two that appeared to be developing the most strongly.

B. More importantly, it would mean that the only blastocysts that would be available for research would be those that had a specific medical problem, some genetic or epigenetic reason why they were not likely to survive if implanted. In other words, the only stem cell lines that could be created would likely have abnormalities that make them useless for research purposes.

Joe Schwarz, the former legislator who fought for the passage of the referendum that lifted the ban on stem cell research last year, is right when he says, “They couldn’t stop it at the ballot box, so they’re trying to stop it by throwing a regulatory barrier at the research.” That’s what this is really about, finding a way to stop what the voters strongly supported last fall.