



WisBusiness: Official says Wisconsin at center of stem cell research and commercialization

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By Brian E. Clark
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MADISON – No one has to tell Jim Leonhart that Wisconsin is the stem cell state.

As head of the Wisconsin Biomedical and Medical Device Association, he's watched – with keen interest - scientific breakthroughs by UW researchers and the launching of five stem cell companies.

“The commercialization of that research is just starting to have an impact now,” argues Leonhart, who says his sentiment was reinforced when Gov. Jim Doyle announced in March that Madison would host the 2008 World Stem Cell Summit.

“With a little patience, we are going to see some real results coming from these companies in the next few years,” he said. He also expects continued research discoveries, he said.

Right now, though, the naming of Madison as the host for the 2008 summit only strengthens Madison's position as the heart of the stem cell world, he said.

“This really acknowledges that we are at center,” he said. “Not only for stem cell research, but the commercialization of that research.”

Late last year, however, it looked like either New York City or Washington, D.C. would play host to the conference, said Bernard Siegel. He is executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute, which sponsors the conference. The first three conferences were held at Stanford, Baylor University in Houston and Harvard.

But when Dr. James Thomson of UW-Madison announced that a team he led had successfully reprogrammed human skin cells to create cells indistinguishable from embryonic stem cells, Siegel shifted focus.

Siegel, who lives in Florida, flew up Wisconsin in January, met with Thomson and others and – in spite of the minus-18 temperature - chose Madison for the 2008 World Stem Cell Conference, which will be held Sept. 22-23.

“I've been assured it's somewhat warmer then,” quipped Siegel, who said Madison's claim to stem cell fame dates back a decade when Thomson was the first researcher to isolate human embryonic stem cells and keep them alive indefinitely.

“Dr. Thomson pretty much launched the whole movement,” he said.

Leonhart credited Sue Carlson, an official with WiCell, for working with Siegel to bring the world stem cell conference to Madison. And he lauded Deb Archer, head of the Madison Convention and Visitors' Bureau, for helping sell the city.

Leonhart said 1,000 or more stem cell advocates, policy makers, business people and leading scientists are expected to visit Madison during the two-day conference. Thomson, and Clive Svendsen, co-director of the UW Stem Cell and Regenerative Medicine Center, are expected to participate.

"It's an exciting event and it's right around the corner," said Leonhart, who said the conference will cost approximately \$250,000 to put together. He said he did not know what the summit's economic impact would be for the city.



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