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Group fights for stem cell research

U-M researcher says state laws make it hard to do some kinds of research

By Kingson Man, Daily Staff Reporter
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In a maroon blazer, University alum Kathleen Russell, who graduated from the School of Social Work in 1989, worked the Vandenburg Room of the Michigan League, greeting students as they filed in for the inaugural meeting of the Student Society for Stem Cell Research.

The meeting would feature addresses by a state congressman and a distinguished biologist, but the first tip-off that this was no ordinary mass meeting was Russell herself. Hands and arms shaking, she steadied herself by grabbing hold of a chair, all the while continuing conversations with attendees.

Russell explained that she had early-onset Parkinson's disease, and that tonight was about advocacy for stem cell research to help people like her.

In response to news last fall that the University had created the Center for Stem Cell Biology, LSA senior Matt Pianko set out to create a parallel student group.

The Student Society for Stem Cell Research aims to generate interest and enthusiasm in the emerging field.

The club members hope to be more than cheerleaders on the sidelines.

Seized with the sense of a critical moment, Pianko plans to educate and clear up the muddy waters surrounding embryonic stem cell research, which involves harvesting cells from embryos that would otherwise be destroyed.

Detractors of this research find ethical and religious cause for putting it on hold.

But many say for patients with spinal cord injuries, diabetes, Parkinson's disease and a great number of other diseases, waiting comes at too great a price.

In an address to a crowd of 60 at the meeting, University stem cell researcher Sean Morrison explained the necessity of conducting research on embryonic stem cells in addition to "adult" stem cells in order to acquire a deeper understanding of these diseases.

And with many other states putting their full support behind stem cell research " California leads the pack with public support and a \$3-billion initiative " it's difficult to do stem cell research in Michigan, which has some of the strictest regulations in the country.

"Indiana will let me do it, California will pay me to do it, but Michigan will jail me if I do it," Morrison said, referring to somatic cell nuclear transfer, a research technique that exchanges the nuclear material of an egg cell to produce tissues identical to and safer for the patient.

At the meeting, State Rep. Andy Meisner (D-Ferndale) explained how knee-jerk legislation in response to the cloning of Dolly the sheep in 1996 led to overly restrictive regulations.

Meisner has drafted legislation to remove restrictions on embryonic stem cell techniques while strengthening the penalty against the less scientifically sound technique of human reproductive cloning.

The bill is stuck in legislative limbo.

Meisner, a University alum, urged students to speak out and become advocates for what they believe in.

"Set up a meeting with your representative," Meisner said. "Get two or 20 or 2,000 of your friends involved."

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