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Measure would relax stem cell restrictions

Granholm favors move, prominent Republicans don't, thus reducing the chance of bill's passage.

Tim Martin Associated Press /

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LANSING -- A car wreck more than 20 years ago left Danny Heumann paralyzed from the chest down. The Ann Arbor man now runs an organization that raises money for spinal cord injury research. He says there is promise for him -- and for people with diseases such as Parkinson's, multiple sclerosis and juvenile diabetes -- through embryonic stem cell research.

But he says Michigan law does not allow the emerging science to flourish. Heumann supports legislation introduced by state Rep. Andrew Meisner, D-Ferndale, that would loosen restrictions on the research.

"I am confident with the scientists we have we can do this research in an ethical and moral way," Heumann, 38, said last week. "It would be huge. There would no place better to do this than Michigan."

In Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm's State of the State speech last month, she said fewer restrictions on stem cell research could boost investment in life sciences and aid Michigan's economy. But several prominent Republicans are not supportive of the Meisner legislation, damaging its chances of passing.

Right to Life of Michigan and the Michigan Catholic Conference are opposed to the legislation because it would allow human embryos to be destroyed to harvest their stem cells.

"We want cures, too," Right to Life legislative affairs director Ed Rivet said. "But we have different means to achieving them."

Stem cells are rare cells in tissues that give rise to most other cells. Michigan is one of several states debating the issue. Missouri, Maryland and Florida are among the states where debate has peaked in recent weeks.

Michigan law allows research on stem cells that are obtained from adults. The University of Michigan, for example, has become a leader in this field.

But some scientists say embryonic stem cell research offers potential medical advancements that adult stem cell research does not. And Michigan has some of the most restrictive embryonic stem cell research laws in the nation, Meisner says.

"It's our belief this research is something we need to do," Meisner said. "So many other states are researching this. We want this advancement to happen in Michigan."

State law does not permit Michigan researchers to get embryos left over from fertility treatments in the state. Researchers say those embryos are often thrown away, although some groups opposed to the research question how much this happens.

State scientists can use embryonic stem cell lines from California, Illinois or other states with less restrictive laws. Those lines sometimes are patented by other researchers. The situation leaves Michigan researchers less able to innovate and lead the search for new cures.