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Debate, move ahead on stem cell research

Life sciences deserve Legislature's support

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"We're looking to all of you as our leaders in government to do all you can to alleviate our suffering. ... Please don't let us down."

Ann Arbor resident Danny Heumann made that emotional plea last week to the state House Health Policy Committee, which held a public hearing in Lansing on legislation to ease Michigan's restrictions on embryonic stem cell research.

Heumann is paralyzed from the chest down and confined to a wheelchair. He and thousands like him hope stem cell research can yield a cure. Researchers in Michigan are hamstrung by this state's ban on research that would harm an embryo - even though fertility clinics regularly throw out frozen embryos.

In contrast, states like California, Connecticut, Illinois and New Jersey are nourishing stem cell research, with both legislation and funding.

"Michigan's law does not protect a single embryo; it only delays medical research that the people of this state support," Sean Morrison, director of the University of Michigan Center for Stem Cell Biology, told The Ann Arbor News.

State Rep. Andrew Meisner, D-Ferndale, is sponsoring a three-bill package that would remove limits on embryonic stem cell research. It would also allow for the creation of stem cells through cloning and strengthen a ban on human cloning.

This is the second time he's tried introducing such legislation. Last year, the proposal didn't get as far as a hearing, so it's encouraging that lawmakers are at least willing to open the topic to debate.

Yet despite last week's hearing, committee chair Rep. Edward Gaffney, R-Grosse Pointe, isn't expected to bring the legislation for a vote - making it dead in committee, once again.

If the state is serious about funding its life sciences industry - and based on plans to invest \$90 million in life sciences over the next two years, it appears to be - then legislators must confront the controversial, emotionally charged issue of embryonic stem cell research.

Heumann asked legislators not to make the issue a "political football."

We echo Heumann's plea, and hope that lawmakers won't let us down.

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