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Experts in Detroit for World Stem Cell Summit

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The Detroit News

Detroit — The rapidly advancing field of stem cell research will be highlighted over the next three days in Detroit with this morning's opening of the World Stem Cell Summit. With an expected attendance of 1,200 projected to pump \$1 million into the local economy, the gathering will feature researchers, industry leaders, government officials and advocates from 30 countries.

More than 100 experts are on the agenda, with highlights to include clinical trials using adult and embryonic stem cells to better treat disease; regenerative medicine against aging, ethical lessons learned from the past and more.

Michigan was chosen to host the sixth annual summit because voters in 2008 approved Proposal 2, which allowed researchers to do embryonic stem cell research that essentially was banned in the state as other states moved forward.

The summit is timely, with the University of Michigan's announcement Sunday that it created the state's first embryonic stem cell line. But it also comes as opponents continue efforts to stop what experts regard as the most promising part of the field locally with legislative attempts and on the national level with a federal lawsuit seeking to ban federal funding.

"This is an exciting time in stem cell research," said Sean Morrison, director of the U-M Center for Stem Cell Biology. "On one hand, we are finally starting to deliver on some of the opportunities created by Proposal 2 and the world is coming to see what's happening in Michigan. On the other hand, the federal courts could soon do serious damage to the field by blocking federal funding. It never seems like we get off the rollercoaster."

The summit will feature experts such as those from the Harvard Stem Cell Institute, the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, Australian Stem Cell Centre and Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center in Israel.

But the summit will also include local experts from U-M, Michigan State University, Wayne State University and Oakland University, along with leaders from Beaumont and Henry Ford hospitals, Tech Town, WSU's tech and research park, and MichBio, which is promoting bioscience industry growth.

"Life sciences is one of the sectors we're growing to help diversify our economy and create jobs," Gov. Jennifer Granholm said in her weekly radio address. "The choice of Michigan for the 2010 World Stem Cell Summit is further evidence that our state is becoming a leader in stem cell research and the growing regenerative medicine industry."

The summit comes two years after Michigan voters approved a constitutional amendment allowing embryonic stem cell research, making it a "stem cell state," organizers said.

But a few months after the vote, a package of bills was introduced in the Michigan Legislature that sought to regulate the research and passed this spring by the Republican-controlled Senate. Andy Dillon, speaker of the Democrat-led Michigan House of Representatives, issued a statement soon after.

"The Senate bills appear to be political in nature and ignore both the will of the people as well as the state's Constitution," Dillon said. "The House is and will remain focused on addressing the state's jobs and fiscal crises."

Attempts were also made to regulate the Michigan research as recently as last week, when language was attached to the state's Higher Education budget. But it was taken out before passage, according to Ed Rivet, legislative director of Right to Life of Michigan.

"An acceptable level of transparency within the human embryo destruction business is sadly lacking in Michigan," said Dave Maluchnik, spokesman for the Michigan Catholic Conference, which also opposes the research.

Nationally, an appeals court made a ruling last week that allows for federally-funded embryonic stem cell research to temporarily continue during an appeal, after an injunction was issued in August by a lower court considering a lawsuit to halt the funding.

Bernard Siegel of the Genetics Policy Institute, which presents the World Stem Cell Summit, said this case is to embryonic stem cell research what Roe versus Wade was to reproductive rights. That's why he filed a legal brief to support continuing federal support of the research.

"Our goal is to promote funding, collaborations, cooperation and remove regulatory roadblocks," said Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute. "This is the future of medicine."

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