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Catholic group to campaign for study of adult stem cells

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BY DAWSON BELL

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The Michigan Catholic Conference will launch a major education campaign this week aimed at promoting support for research using adult stem cells and clarifying the church's opposition to embryonic stem cell research.

The campaign "Finding Cures & Protecting Life," described as the largest in history for the conference, includes the distribution of a stem cell DVD and supporting materials to more than 500,000 Catholic households in Michigan and encourages 800 parishes around the state to focus on the issue.

Paul Long, vice president for public policy at the conference, said Friday the campaign is intended to counter "the hype over embryonic stem cell research that has overshadowed the real hope" offered by adult stem cell research.

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The Catholic Conference campaign comes as proponents of embryonic stem cell research are weighing options for a 2008 ballot proposal, seeking to overturn Michigan's ban on research that involves the destruction of human embryos.

David Waymire, spokesman for a coalition of groups that supports lifting the ban, said Friday the Catholic Conference initiative is welcome.

"The more informed people are, the better off everybody will be in this discussion," Waymire said. "We shouldn't be cutting ourselves off from an area of research that has so much potential for moving health care forward, as well as the state's economy."

Under legislation backed by the coalition, the only embryos used in research would be so-called leftover embryos at fertility clinics, which would otherwise be discarded, Waymire said.

In a letter accompanying the Catholic Conference DVD, however, Michigan's diocesan bishops said, "Adult stem cell research, which does not harm the embryo, is morally permissible," while research, "which involves the direct killing of human embryos and leads to human cloning, is morally unacceptable."

The pending legislation calls for a revision of Michigan's 1998 ban on human cloning to permit a process known as somatic cell nuclear transfer, used in some embryonic stem cell research, which the church and others regard as a form of cloning.

Both forms of stem cell research have been heralded for their potential to treat an array of chronic and debilitating disease and injury, including catastrophic spinal cord injuries, diabetes and Parkinson's.

The church describes claims about the therapeutic potential of embryonic stem cells as almost entirely speculative, while pointing to dozens of conditions for which treatments have been developed using adult stem cells. The Catholic Conference DVD features two patients who suffered spinal cord injuries in automobile accidents describing the benefits of such treatment.

Leading advocates for embryonic stem cell research counter that research using embryos to create

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stem cell lines is relatively recent and that many scientists believe its potential for cures is much greater.

Waymire said Michigan is falling behind neighboring states, which are actively promoting embryonic stem cell research, reaping both scientific and economic benefits.

He said no decision has been made on whether to undertake a ballot proposal campaign to change Michigan's law. Although the embryonic stem cell legislation appears unlikely to win approval in the Legislature, Waymire said a ballot proposal would be costly and complicated.

The Catholic Conference's Paul Long said the stem cell education initiative was necessary to "raise the level of understanding" about the church's position, regardless of whether or not the issue goes to the voters. He declined to estimate the cost of the campaign.

Contact **DAWSON BELL** at 313-222-6604 or dbell@freepress.com.

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