

Bishops bring stem-cell stance to their flocks

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By Charles Honey

Press Religion Editor

GRAND RAPIDS -- As a physician, Dr. William Passinault says it's a bad bet to spend money on embryonic stem-cell research. As a Catholic, he says it is morally wrong.

But the retired surgeon also has seen patients helped by adult stem-cell therapy. So he applauded Michigan's Catholic bishops for a campaign launched this week to educate parishioners about the church's stand on stem cells.

"Since folks are going to be potentially asked to vote on (a ballot) issue -- and surveys indicate the public on both sides are not well informed -- this is certainly a praiseworthy effort at education," said Passinault, chairman of the bioethics committee at Saint Mary's Health Care.

The campaign comes as supporters of embryonic stem-cell research consider a petition drive to put a proposal on the 2008 ballot to lift the state ban.

More than 500,000 Catholic households statewide, including about 55,000 in West Michigan, were mailed packets from the Michigan Catholic Conference that are signed by the state's seven bishops.

A 12-minute DVD and brochure outline the church's opposition to embryonic stem-cell research and its support of using adult stem cells to treat dozens of diseases.

Parishes also received materials urging them to address the issue this weekend. The first Sunday in October is annually designated Respect Life Sunday by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Grand Rapids Bishop Walter Hurley encouraged parish priests to use the materials, saying they clarify church teaching on a complex issue.

"There is a perception the church is opposed to stem-cell research, and that's totally not true," he said. "There is no question about the commitment of the church to stem-cell research using adult stem cells."

Stem cells derived from bone marrow and umbilical cord blood help treat Parkinson's disease and other conditions, he and other bishops assert. Embryonic stem cells have provided no treatments, require killing the embryo and could lead to cloning, they argue.

"We need to be extraordinarily cautious when dealing with these issues," Hurley said. "Life is not ours to begin or to end."

Send e-mail to the author: choney@grpress.com