

Message from the Executive Vice President for Medical Affairs



From election coverage to the untimely death of Christopher Reeve and the highly visible support of public figures like Michael J. Fox and Ron Reagan, stem cell research and its controversy have become part of an ongoing American dialogue.

The ethical and political complications of stem cell research are considerable, as are the complexities of the science itself, but the potential benefits to those who suffer from incurable conditions are incalculable. Stem cells, adult as well as embryonic, may hold keys to cures for a number of debilitating diseases and disorders, such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes and cancer. These "cells of origin," and the processes by which they differentiate into intricate organs and tissues, present us with an opportunity to understand human development as we never have before, and to pursue novel applications of the body's own processes of regeneration and growth.

As the discourse continues, so should cautious progress. California's \$3 billion commitment to embryonic stem cell research, a citizen-led effort, is a significant development. New Jersey last summer announced a \$9.5-million stem cell program, to be based at Rutgers University. Wisconsin's governor recently proposed a \$750 million program of public and private support for stem cell and other research. As these centers of activity provide students and researchers with environments of opportunity, Michigan will need to remain competitive in order to continue to attract the brightest minds in academic research.

That is why we are particularly proud of U-M initiatives such as the Exploratory Center for Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research (page 14), funded by the National Institutes of Health and one of only three such centers in the U.S. The center, under the direction of Sue O'Shea, Ph.D., is training U-M researchers and students to work with stem cells, preparing them for current and future biomedical science.

The experimental beginnings of any scientific field present great challenges. Established funding sources such as NIH, guardians of the public trust, understandably are interested not only in investigations that carry reasonable expectations of success, but also in a true, fundamental commitment on the part of the institution. It is in these early stages that private funding is most crucial: to support the test-

ing of theory, to investigate the viability of new scientific approaches, to follow the insights and instincts of imaginative researchers in scientific terrain previously unseen and yet to be charted.

For basic science at Michigan and elsewhere, the needs are great, the challenges legion, and the priorities constantly shifting. With great vision and foresight, and solid trust in the collective basic science intellect at U-M, Dean Allen Lichter created the Endowment for the Basic Sciences with substantial funding from the Dean's Office. The endowment has been placed in the hands of the leaders of the medical school's basic science departments and institutes who together establish priorities for funding and make awards to support various basic science activities and initiatives.

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This innovative commitment on the dean's part is helping our basic scientists to focus resources and is encouraging collaboration across disciplines in the most fundamental and meaningful of ways. The U-M Endowment for the Basic Sciences is also enabling those early explorations that may well one day result in significant support from established funding sources.

The dean has set high standards of creative management and collective decision-making. We need to sustain and nurture such standards

if Michigan is to continue to make its mark on medicine and medical science, which it can do only if it continues to attract the brightest, most inquisitive faculty, researchers, students, post-docs, residents and fellows. While some fear a flow of the best and brightest to those states with currently aggressive stem cell research agendas, that will happen only if we falter in creating our own rich, collaborative, exciting environment of opportunity. Vigorous programs in leading areas, including embryonic stem cell research, will keep us vital to medicine and among the leading academic health systems in the nation.

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