

Michigan Catholics to get DVD explaining stem-cell research

DETROIT – To clear up confusion about stem-cell research, the Michigan Catholic Conference has launched a statewide educational program to explain the Catholic Church's teaching on human life, the church's support for adult stem-cell research and its opposition to embryonic stem-cell research.

As part of the program every registered Catholic home in Michigan will soon be receiving a DVD and other information in the mail.

On Oct. 1, the conference began mailing digital video discs, along with a letter signed jointly by Michigan diocesan bishops and a brochure, to 504,000 Catholic homes in the state.

"Stem-cell research has moved to the forefront of human life issues in Michigan and throughout the nation," said Dave Maluchnik, public policy associate at the Lansing-based conference, the public policy voice of all seven Michigan dioceses.

"Michigan diocesan bishops, as teachers of the faith, have launched an unprecedented education program to teach the Catholic faithful about the relationship between stem-cell research and the Catholic teaching on human life," he added.

The 12-minute video and accompanying brochure both are titled "The Science of Stem Cells: Finding Cures and Protecting Life."

The bishops' letter addresses the difference between adult and embryonic stem-cell research, and communicates the message that the church supports finding cures while protecting human life through the advancements made with adult stem-cell research.

Maluchnik said the DVD and the written materials concentrate on three central messages:

- There are two different types of stem-cell research – adult and embryonic.
- Adult stem-cell research is ethical. It does not harm the human embryo and treatment using adult stem cells has been successful, whereas embryonic stem-cell research has not led to cures or treatments. Also, embryonic stem-cell research is immoral as it leads to human cloning and necessitates the destruction of the human embryo to extract its stem cells – a violation of church teaching that all human life is sacred.
- The Catholic Church supports adult stem-cell research and encourages the faithful to do likewise.

Those also were the messages conveyed in mailings that went out from bishops in each of the seven Michigan dioceses to their respective parishes.

The parishes also received the DVD, along with a question-and-answer document to brief parish staff on the issue; suggested bulletin announcements; a letter from Mercy Sister Monica Kostielney, president and CEO of the Michigan Catholic Conference; and a copy of the conference's Focus publication for October 2007 on the issue.

"It is the belief of the state's bishops that the secular news media has greatly distorted the issue of stem-cell research and, in doing so, improperly conveyed the church's position. Therefore, the bishops decided it was imperative to bring the truth of the church's teaching on human life as it relates to stem-cell research directly to the faithful," Maluchnik said.

While embryonic stem-cell research has received considerable publicity and the endorsement of some high-profile celebrities, it is adult stem-cell research that has so far yielded the best results.

Maluchnik pointed out that adult stem cells are currently used in the treatment of more than 70 medical conditions in human patients, including several types of cancer, Parkinson's disease, sickle-cell anemia, diabetes, lymphoma and many others.

On the other hand, he continued, "it is not a foregone conclusion that embryonic

stem cells will produce treatments, or even cures, in human patients.”

For embryonic stem-cell research, human embryos must be destroyed, but adult stem cells exist throughout the human body. They are found in places such as fat tissue, dental pulp, bone marrow, umbilical-cord blood and the amniotic fluid that surrounds unborn babies.

Maluchnik noted that both bone marrow and cord blood can be donated and stored to help others suffering from severe debilitating diseases.

The church in Michigan hopes Catholics will urge their state legislators “to oppose embryo destruction and human cloning should the issue come before the Michigan Legislature,” Maluchnik added.

Jean Peduzzi-Nelson, a researcher and professor at the Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit and one of the experts appearing on the DVD knows adult stem cells can lead to new treatments, because she has seen promising results.

“I believe adult stem cells are the safest and probably most effective for treatment,” she said.

A member of Our Lady of Sorrows Parish in Farmington, she is currently involved in a clinical trial prompted by the work of a Portuguese doctor in taking adult stem cells from the uppermost area of the inside of the nose and injecting them into patients with spinal cord injuries.

Peduzzi-Nelson said patients involved in the trials have exhibited greater sensitivity in treated areas and an increased ability of their muscles to contract.

Besides the ethical-moral issues, Peduzzi-Nelson said, the use of a patient’s own adult stem cells appears to have several advantages over embryonic stem cells: “You don’t have to worry about rejection (by the patient’s body), or about disease transmission, or about the overgrowth of cells (tumor formation).”