

Stem-cell scientists challenged to justify research involving embryos

DETROIT - As more than 1,200 business, academic and government leaders from 25 countries gathered in Detroit for the World Stem Cell Summit, Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron of Detroit said research that destroys human embryos “deserves our scrutiny and scorn.”

In an opinion piece published Oct. 3 by the Detroit Free Press, the archbishop said embryonic stem-cell research violates the principles on which the United States was founded and Michigan’s fetal protection law.

“If, indeed, we believe we were ‘created equal,’ doesn’t that belief extend to the indefensible living embryo in the petri dish?” he asked, quoting the Declaration of Independence. “And what of ‘life’ in ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’? First, it must begin.”

The Oct. 4-6 summit, organized by the Genetics Policy Institute, brought together scientists, patients, advocates, business executives, investors, educators, policymakers, government officials and ethicists. Archbishop Vigneron was not a participant in the meeting.

In the article headlined “Even in petri dish, life merits protection,” Archbishop Vigneron said, “I started out as an embryo. So did you and everyone else who shares this planet with us. And there is great significance to this irrefutable fact beyond the shared experience.”

The archbishop said research using umbilical-cord blood cells and adult stem cells “is to be saluted and supported” and has resulted in “a growing number of cures and treatments.”

But he said those doing embryonic stem-cell research would agree “that it is imperative to preserve an embryo because it is a living cell.”

“It is after the living embryo is preserved with its human DNA signature that it is

dissected, cloned, destroyed or discarded,” he added. “True democracy is built on life, not death.

“Ours is not the first country or culture to selectively pursue a moral calculus that justifies taking a life to enable scientific experiments,” Archbishop Vigneron said. “We know from sad experience that dangers follow when we put human hands on the switch of life and death.”

He noted that Michigan’s criminal code punishes “individuals who harm or kill a fetus – or embryo! – during an intentional assault.”

“How can there be such a disconnect with what happens in an assault case and what occurs in a laboratory when a human life is destroyed?” he asked.

In the former case, a person is charged with a felony, while in the latter the person is “likely considered some sort of medical pioneer,” he said.

“Yet the results are the same: two fewer people in the world who had no power to stop what was happening to them and had no voice in their demise,” Archbishop Vigneron wrote.

On the day the summit opened, University of Michigan researchers announced that they had created the state’s first embryonic stem-cell line. In 2008, Michigan voters approved a constitutional amendment that permitted stem cells to be created from so-called “spare” embryos not used in in vitro fertilization treatments.