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Anticipated reversal on stem cell research, seen as boon to Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute

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From staff and wire reports

Within days of his inauguration, President-elect Barack H. Obama is expected to issue an executive order reversing President Bush's restrictions on federal funds for human embryonic stem cell research.

And Massachusetts, with passage last year of a \$1 billion life sciences initiative aimed at making the state a center for biological research, including stem cell studies, would be poised to reap immediate rewards.

"I think reversing the policy is absolutely the right direction to go," said Lawrence M. Schwartz, a University of Massachusetts biology professor and the science director of the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute in Springfield.

"The potential of embryonic stem cells to be able to treat what are otherwise incurable diseases is remarkable. To have that constraint removed for the research community will really allow us to tackle this pressing human health care need. This would be invaluable for disease like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes and many others," Schwartz said.

The policy reversal would not only channel more money to stem cell work, but also lead to increased availability of human embryonic stem cell lines for study and eliminate a complex bureaucracy that has arisen to enforce the Bush provision.

President Bush, early in his first term, prohibited federal funding of research conducted on any human embryonic stem cell lines created after Aug. 9, 2001. However, fewer than two dozen stem cell lines proved eligible and useful, and it can be extremely difficult to grow some of those lines in laboratories. Furthermore, scientists complain about the lack of genetic diversity and the prevalence of genetic abnormalities in this limited pool.

Susan Windham-Bannister, the president and CEO of the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center, a quasi-public agency created to carry out the state's life sciences initiative, noted the state's \$7.7 million investment in establishing a stem cell bank at University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester. It holds stem cells lines that are not among the few federally approved lines. Once the federal restrictions are dropped, these lines would become available to researchers backed by federal funding.

"We're hopeful there will be a change in the federal policy and we'll be well positioned in Massachusetts to capitalize on that," she said.

U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said, "A repeal of the ban is critical so that we may take

advantage of the opportunity to save lives, find cures and give hope to those suffering. It is an opportunity that we cannot miss."

Although representatives of Obama's transition team declined to comment on his plans, Pelosi and other policymakers expect him to quickly issue an executive order repealing the ban. Congress would also ensure that future presidents couldn't unilaterally change the policy without congressional approval.

"It is one of our top priorities," Pelosi said.

Legislation removing the ban has been passed twice during the last few years, and Bush vetoed it both times.

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