

NY taxpayers to pay donors for stem cell studies

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(AP) -- Hanqi Miao said she wanted to donate her eggs to help infertile couples reproduce, but she acknowledged the money is good, too: She said she'll be paid about \$5,000.

"Who doesn't want money in your hand?" said the 21-year-old woman, who will have to undergo hormone treatments that could abnormally swell her ovaries to the size of small grapefruits and cause discomfort.

Soon, New York [women](#) will be able to donate their eggs not only to help others get pregnant, but also for [stem cell research](#). And they'll still be able to get reimbursement of up to \$10,000 - paid for by taxpayers.

The board that oversees funding of the state's stem cell research recently voted to make New York the only state that allows taxpayer dollars to be used to pay for women to donate their eggs strictly for stem cell research.

State health officials say it is necessary to compensate women for the burden, discomfort and expense related to the donation process so that suitable eggs can be found for stem cell research.

But some critics say the policy could encourage cash-strapped women to take risks with their health. They question the use of what they call "embryonic human life" for research.

Researchers believe stem cell research could lead to treatments for debilitating illnesses, such as diabetes and Parkinson's disease. Yet the science is still emergent, and experimental techniques such as somatic cell nuclear transfer - also known as therapeutic cloning - have stirred controversy because embryos can be destroyed in the process, which some consider akin to killing human life.

Research, though, requires a suitable supply of eggs for research, which is where donors like Miao come in.

The process involves hormone injections, producing more eggs per cycle than would be considered normal and retrieval with anesthesia, said Debra Mathews of the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics.

"We don't really have good data on the risks" of the donation process, Mathews said. "You're asking women to undergo this unknown risk for unknown benefit."

State Health Commissioner Richard Daines explained that the decision by the Empire State Stem Cell Board, which helps oversee \$600 million in state funding for stem cell studies over 11 years, would be a boon to researchers.

Most eggs taken for reproduction have been screened for health problems. What's necessary in stem cell research is often the reverse, because the intent is to understand diseases and find treatments for them.

"If a stem cell researcher is interested in something related to sickle cell disease, which we know is highly genetic, they might then say we are looking for a woman with this gene, and we will compensate them for the eggs," Daines said.

The Rev. Thomas Berg, a Roman Catholic priest in the Archdiocese of

New York who sits on the board, was the only member to vote against the compensation policy.

He said he opposed using taxpayer money to entice vulnerable women to donate their eggs for what he called speculative research. "We have to understand that this is aimed at a bigger project of using embryonic human life as raw material for research," he said.

Dr. Kenneth Prager, a bioethicist at Columbia University Medical Center, said he understands the concerns raised about paying women to donate their eggs for research, but society has already deemed it ethical to pay women to donate eggs for reproduction.

"What is happening is that we are paying women approximately the same amount of money they are already getting for the donation of their eggs for fertility treatments," he said.

While the Empire State Stem Cell Board's decision on June 11 makes it possible for women to donate their eggs expressly for stem cell research, the program is anticipated to be in place at the earliest by 2010, according to Claire Pospisil, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Health. Research institutions would need to apply for the funding.

The pay for donating eggs would be at least \$5,000, but it could be up to \$10,000 in certain cases. The payment guidelines conform to standards set by the American Society for Reproductive Medicine for women who donate their eggs for reproduction.

Miao, who was donating through the Center for Human Reproduction in Manhattan, said she understands why women would want to donate their eggs for research, but she said her goal is to help a couple unable to reproduce on their own.

"I value the meaning of life - actually, you are giving a life, a living person, to a family," she said. "And that just somehow means more to me."

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