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Bill a key to medical advances

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THE bill being debated this week in the Victorian Legislative Assembly makes amendments to Victorian legislation to mirror the Commonwealth legislation, the Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction and the Regulation of Human Embryo Research Amendment Act. The amendments are based on recommendations to the Commonwealth by the legislative review committee led by the late John Lockhart.

The Lockhart review included the recommendation to allow the technique of somatic cell nuclear transfer, otherwise known as therapeutic cloning.

This important legislation requires each of us as MPs to carefully consider the proposed amendments and the purpose and potential consequences of the bill.

There are divergent views on this legislation within each party caucus and in the community.

The Lockhart review considered more than 1000 submissions and held public consultations.

In framing its recommendations, the Lockhart review said "the committee considered that the higher the potential benefits of an activity, the greater the need for ethical objections to be of a high level and widely accepted in order to prevent that activity". This is a very important aspect of considering this legislation.

Having carefully considered the legislation, I am supporting the bill.

I support the bill as I believe that the potential benefits from the research that this legislation will allow are extremely valuable and could potentially provide treatments for a vast array of conditions from which many people suffer.

As a former nurse and researcher at the Cancer Council, I have seen many people die prematurely from little understood diseases. For some conditions, treatments are limited or virtually unavailable. The research that will be enabled by this legislation will allow better understanding of diseases and, potentially, treatments for a large range of diseases including Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, spinal cord injuries, type 1 diabetes, liver disease, and muscular dystrophies.

A former colleague of mine died from motor neurone disease a little over 18 months after her diagnosis. Nothing could really be done to help her and no treatment could offer her much hope. A truly horrible disease.

I support the bill because research will be conducted under strict licensing conditions monitored by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

I support the bill because I believe the consent procedures in place protect women who are potential egg donors. This is a very important issue. Women must be fully informed of what is involved in donating eggs, as is now the case when women donate eggs for reproduction. The donation of eggs, which is obviously central to this research being undertaken, will be done under licensing conditions of the National Health and Medical Research Council. Payment for human tissue including sperm and eggs is already prohibited under Victorian legislation.

I also want to state that I do not support cloning of human beings.

The legislation specifically prohibits reproductive human cloning. Therapeutic cloning produces cells for research that have the same characteristics as the cells with the specific disease under investigation. In time and with appropriate safeguards in place, stem cells could be used therapeutically for the treatment of disease. The cells created from therapeutic cloning have not been created for implantation and it is specifically prohibited in the legislation.

If I thought this legislation would allow cloning of human beings, I would not vote for it. It is about cloning of human cells, not cloning of human beings.

I support the bill because it will provide for a nationally consistent legal framework to regulate this research. There should not be a situation in which researchers can do one thing in one state and something else in another. Victoria is a leading biotechnology state with some of the best researchers in the world working in our research institutes. Victoria should continue to lead the world in research that could really make a difference to so many lives. I support legislation that could benefit so many people.

Maxine Morand is parliamentary secretary for health.

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