

Bracks to sell stem cell plan to Governor

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May 04, 2007 06:46pm

Article from: AAP

VICTORIAN Premier Steve Bracks will ask Californian Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to invest in Melbourne's stem cell research now that new therapeutic cloning laws have been passed.

Victoria's new laws mirror recent federal legislation and were passed last night in a conscience vote, 23 votes to 16.

Mr Bracks flew to the US today to promote Victoria's investment potential by highlighting its work in stem cells and other research, at a biotechnology conference in Boston.

He said he would also discuss stem cells with Governor Schwarzenegger, who had resources available for the research.

"They (California) have a fund, a significant fund... and they are looking for partners around the world," Mr Bracks said.

"We are an ideal partner and I'll be putting to Governor Schwarzenegger that in terms of stem cell research Australia is one of the leaders, Victoria, and Melbourne is the centre of that."

Victorian scientists hope to use therapeutic cloning within months.

Monash Immunology and Stem Cell Laboratories associate director Graham Jenkin said Victorian scientists had been hamstrung by a ban on therapeutic cloning.

They would now be better able to research cures for diseases such as cystic fibrosis and multiple sclerosis, he said.

"We're very excited about the new legislation," he said.

"We were somewhat hamstrung in not being able to collaborate (internationally)," he said.

"What it means is in Victoria we will now be able to, subject to licensing, make what we call disease-specific stem cells," Professor Jenkin said.

He hoped his centre would receive a licence within six to nine months.

Somatic cell nuclear transfer, also known as therapeutic cloning, involves inserting the nucleus of a diseased cell into an unfertilised egg, then using the resultant embryonic stem cells for medical purposes.

Upper house MPs debated the legislative changes this week.

Some opposed the Bill, arguing therapeutic cloning would create human life to destroy it.

Labor's upper house leader John Lenders was among those who voted against the Bill, though he said he was reluctant.

"I am absolutely torn. I would rather crawl under a rock than vote," he told the house.

"While every cell in my body wants to support the Bill, this whole issue of where we draw a line and the slippery slope disturbs me."

The Bill passed the lower house in March.

Laws passed in federal parliament in December override Victoria's previous ban but the state law change is intended to remove potential legal complications.

Mr Bracks is also aiming to strike an agreement on climate change matters with Governor Schwarzenegger and will travel to the UK for talks with Prime Minister Tony Blair.

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