Media release

From the Minister for Health and Minister for Innovation

Tuesday, 13 March 2007

NEW KEYS FOR VICTORIAN RESEARCHERS TO UNLOCK DISEASE

Victoria aims to become the first state to allow somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) for medical research with the Bracks Government today introducing amendments to the Infertility Treatment Act in Parliament.

The Premier Steve Bracks has said the vote to ease current restrictions on SCNT, otherwise known as 'therapeutic cloning', will be a conscience vote.

Health Minister Bronwyn Pike said adopting the proposed changes would bring Victorian legislation into line with new Commonwealth legislation and enable Victorian scientists to apply for Federal licences to undertake SCNT research.

"Victoria aims to be the first state to have legislation consistent with federal law," Ms Pike said.

"The Bracks Government has consistently argued that we should not be impeding progress that could alleviate the burden of disease on society and the family.

"We've also led the debate for clearer regulation of stem cell production for medical research.

"These amendments allow stem cell research to continue to pioneer new medical treatments within an improved regulatory environment."

Minister for Innovation, John Brumby said Victoria has led the national debate on improving restrictions on SCNT.

"Given our role to date, Victoria is now uniquely placed to be the first state to pass complementary legislation to the Federal Legislation passed last year," Mr Brumby said.

"The Australian stem cell sector is recognised as an international leader with Victoria the hub of this activity as well as being home to the one of the nation's leading research institutes, the Australian Stem Cell Centre.

"Victorian scientists have been actively lobbying for legislative certainty so that they can contribute to this important work along with their colleagues in the US, UK, and Sweden.

"These amendments will allow our scientists to contribute to greater knowledge and a better understanding of many degenerative diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's in a rigorous, accountable and transparent regulatory framework."

Ms Pike said SCNT did not involve fertilisation through the merger of an egg and a sperm and that the ban on reproductive cloning would remain in place.

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“Somatic cell nuclear transfer involves making embryonic stem cells for medical research by merging an unfertilised egg with the skin cell of a patient,” she said.

“This is not about the creation of an embryo to become a new human being. The proposed amendments specifically prohibit the implantation of products of SCNT into the uterus which is reproductive cloning. It will become a criminal offence to do this.”

Mr Brumby said the use of SCNT in animal models had demonstrated the possibility of curing diseases like Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s without the complication of stem cell rejection.

“While there is much to do and the road to curing these diseases in humans is a long one, it is clear the greatest roadblock is our scientists’ inability to perform this work in human cells in Australia,” he said.

“The independent Lockhart Report commissioned by the Commonwealth found that the support and potential benefits outweighed the perceived risks associated with SCNT.”

Ms Pike said it was important to undertake research in both adult and embryonic stem cells.

“The Bracks Government supports research in both areas because it doesn’t make sense to close off a promising line of research when that research can be conducted under a strong ethical regulatory regime.”

The amendments aim to:

- Maintain the ban on human reproductive cloning;
- Update the legislation to allow for somatic cell nuclear transfer (therapeutic cloning) to enable the creation of disease specific stem cells and patient tailored stem cell therapies; and
- Uphold the current open and transparent national regulatory regime.

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