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## Public included in ethics debate

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THE ethical boundaries for medical research in Australia are set to be recast, with Health Minister Tony Abbott keen to give the community a say in what constitutes appropriate scientific methods and pursuits.

Having withstood criticism of his personal views on abortion and stem cell research policy changes, Mr Abbott has now obtained a confidential report into the complex issues associated with human research with a view to overhauling the sector.

The Australian has learned the government-appointed Australian Health Ethics Committee was asked to prepare the report for Mr Abbott but outsourced the work, concerned by the sensitive nature of his request and the potential for conflicts of interest to arise should the Minister consider policy changes.

The report is understood to detail the role of human research ethics committees - overseen by the AHEC, which advises the National Health and Medical Research Council and through it the Government - and their relationship with researchers and institutions. It describes the processes undertaken in assessing research proposals, the ethical dilemmas that arise, and how decisions are made on what projects to proceed with.

A spokeswoman for Mr Abbott confirmed the Minister received the report in late December but as of last week had yet to read it. While Mr Abbott initially asked AHEC to consider making the report public, to help foster a broader public debate, his spokeswoman said "no decision has been taken about a public release of the report".

Mr Abbott has previously flagged his belief some researchers are becoming blinkered to the outside world. He has sought to remind those working in the field that they have an obligation to act in the community's best interest - both scientifically and ethically.

In mid-2005, Mr Abbott told a gathering of scientists and medical researchers he felt ethical boundaries in Australia "may need to be refined and adapted for diverse new situations" and insisted the community should play a greater role.

"Researchers should not fear more public scrutiny of the way they handle ethical problems," Mr Abbott told the Ethics in Human Research Conference.

"For all the leap-to-simple-minded-conclusions quality of talkback radio, jury trial and democratic elections demonstrate our confidence in the good sense and judgment of the Australian public. The widest possible ethical scrutiny is no guarantee of ultimate moral right but it's likely to be a better long-term guide than individual judgment or insider review subject to potential peer pressure."

Australian Society for Medical Research president Maria Kavallaris said the existing ethics systems were effective and used sound and rigorous methods.

Associate Professor Kavallaris warned against any greater external involvement in the approval process.

"You would risk people's personal and emotional views interfering with what is already a fairly robust process," she said, emphasising that peer review was the best method of identifying research of a high quality with great potential.

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