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\$500K for stem cell breakthrough

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By Simon Benson

August 07, 2007 12:00am

SYDNEY could become the first city in the world to produce stem cells from cloned human embryos with a \$500,000 grant being offered by Premier Morris Iemma to the first scientist to do it.

With laws lifted on the previously illegal practice, the State Government is now looking to actively fund research to make NSW the world centre of stem cell and cloning technology.

It is the next step along the road to a new medical industry in NSW producing potentially life-saving stem cells.

The controversial method of extracting stem cells has been banned in a host of countries - following moral pressure from conservative lobby groups - but was recently legalised in NSW via a conscience vote in Parliament.

Yesterday Mr Iemma said that with the legislation being passed allowing therapeutic cloning, funding would be allocated from a special \$11.5 million fund to develop it.

"Put simply, this funding will enable NSW scientists to undertake work we hope will result in the creation of the country's first stem-cell lines derived from somatic-cell nuclear transfer embryos. In fact, if successful it could well be a world first," he said.

Prince of Wales Hospital transplant unit head Professor Bernie Tuch said the hospital was developing stem-cell lines to produce insulin-producing cells to treat diabetes.

"We will be putting our hand up," Professor Tuch said. "People in NSW can now apply for funding to move from the concept of therapeutic cloning, to be able to attempt to move it forward. These are small steps, slow steps but in a positive direction."

The National Health and Medical Research Council paved the way six weeks ago for people to apply for licences for such technology.

At present the only stem cells in use or experimentation around the world are adult stem cells or those derived from discarded IVF embryos.

In NSW, scientists will now be able to clone embryos, using a patient's own cells, to develop patient-specific stem-cell lines which would avoid rejection complications when transplanted.

The contentious part of the technology, the cloning, involves taking genetic material from a patient and fusing it into the empty nucleus of an egg cell - effectively creating an embryo in the laboratory. Stem cells taken from the embryo are foundation human cells, which have the ability to grow into any cell in the body such as nerve, heart or blood cells or cells that can produce enzymes or hormones such as insulin.

Experts hope that will lead to cures for a host of diseases and conditions such as diabetes, Parkinson's

disease, heart disease and spinal cord injuries.

However, cloning embryos to produce the cells has outraged moral and religious groups. Catholic Archbishop George Pell tried to pressure NSW MPs to vote against the original Bill.

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For embryonic cloning ... Julia Levery, who suffered a spinal cord injury in a car accident, is a campaigner with the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research Australia. Picture: Brianne Makin / The Daily Telegraph

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