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AAP Lines on stem cell research - Senator Natasha Stott Despoja

The Australian Democrats caution the public against reading too much into the decision by biotechnology company ES Cell International, reported in the journal Science, to cease research into some therapeutic applications for embryonic stem cells.

"This is normal market operation. Biotechnology is an expensive business - taking into account prospects that don't work out, it can require around \$1 billion and ten years to bring a therapy to market. This makes for a very challenging investment environment and biotechnology companies are often having to make difficult decisions on where to focus their finite resources," Democrats Spokesperson for Science and Research, Senator Natasha Stott Despoja, said.

"It is particularly difficult for an area like embryonic stem cell research to attract private funding because it is such a new discipline. No credible authority is pretending that embryonic stem cells will lead to commercial therapies in the short-term but this decision by ES Cell International, while regrettable, is one decision by one company. It does not indicate a total abandonment of embryonic stem cell research by ES Cell International, let alone the biotechnology sector as a whole. In fact, the government of California is pressing ahead with its decision to invest \$US3 billion in the field.

"The sector is still learning the extent of the therapeutic potential of embryonic stem cells and the legislation that was passed in the Australian Parliament last year will give our scientists greater scope to explore this. We do not yet know what embryonic cells are capable of and for critics to claim that this single decision, based on commercial grounds, validates their views of the research is totally at odds with the spirit of scientific discovery," Senator Stott Despoja said.

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