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Abbott stirs up ethics debate for scientists

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09jun07

TONY Abbott has moved to spark a debate on appropriate boundaries for Australian scientists with the release of a report on ethical dilemmas in medical research.

"By releasing this report, I think we give people who have got anxieties about human research, if you like, permission to come forward and tell us what their concerns are," the federal Health Minister told The Weekend Australian.

"If they're legitimate, they should be properly considered; if they're alarmist, they should be politely discounted."

The release of the report, which Mr Abbott commissioned, coincides with Catholic Cardinal George Pell's attempts to influence the stem cell debate in NSW, although Mr Abbott said the timing was not deliberate and the report did not specifically mention stem cells.

"Everyone knows where I stand on stem cells," Mr Abbott said.

"I'm certainly not in the anti-George Pell lynch mob -- never have been and probably never will be."

The report is a series of case studies on ethical dilemmas, and a discussion of the relationship between researchers and their ethics committees, and on the complexity of their work.

It contains no recommendations, but in the foreword, Warwick Anderson, chief executive of the National Health and Medical Research Council, suggests there might be a need for mandatory registration and accreditation of ethics committees, a new monitoring system, and a formal complaints process.

Mr Abbott said while he expected to be the "responder" in any debate, and thought an annual ethics report might be useful, he had some concerns that had not yet been resolved.

"I suppose the question I have long posed is: are we long on ethical process and short on ethical performance? Are we actually getting ethical outcomes, as opposed to a process that is thought to guarantee ethical outcomes but is just an ethical machine?"

At the NHMRC's major ethics meeting in 2005, Mr Abbott asked the Australian Health Ethics Committee to prepare the report, and it was subsequently outsourced to prevent conflict-of-interest claims.

Mr Abbott warned at the time that research "can sometimes develop almost unstoppable momentum as scientists race each other to a suddenly achievable goal".

Labor health spokeswoman Nicola Roxon was not available for comment yesterday.