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Scientists welcome NSW stem cell decision

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STEM cell scientists and patient advocacy groups have welcomed NSW legislation permitting therapeutic cloning.

In a conscious vote in the Legislative Council Tuesday night MPs voted 27-13 in favour of the Human Cloning and Other Prohibited Practices Amendment Bill 2007.

As with similar legislation passed last May in Victoria, the NSW bill harmonises state law with the Commonwealth's recently ammended 2002 anti-cloning and human embryo research laws.

Victorian and NSW scientists can now use therapeutic cloning, or somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT), to create patient specific and disease specific colonies (lines) of human embryonic stem (ES) cells for research.

"It's wonderful," said Bernie Tuch, director of the Diabetes Transplant Unit at the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney.

As states are moving to adopt consistent national legislation, Professor Tuch said scientists will be able to collaborate more effectively.

And that promised hope of new treatments for people living with disabling or life-threatening conditions such as spinal cord injury and Parkinson's disease, said Joanna Knott, convenor of the peak patient advocacy group CAMRA, Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research Australia.

"It's a relief to see that the majority of NSW MPs understood the importance of the potential benefits of stem cell research," Ms Knott said.

While NSW Science Minister Verity Firth described the bill as "compassionate" and the premier Morris lemma said it was "balanced", churches condemned it.

"I think we have taken a wrong turning," claimed the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen.

As Cardinal George Pell is overseas, a spokesman for the Catholic curch said the legislation legalised "morally abhorrent" practices such as SCNT.

Earlier in the NSW debate Cardinal Pell warned there would be "consequences" for Catholic parliamentarians who voted for the bill.

The upper house Parliamentary Privileges Committee will investigate the comments to determine if the comments were in contempt of parliament.

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