

Australia relaxes stem cell laws after emotive debate

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By James Grubel

CANBERRA (Reuters) - Australia will allow embryonic stem cells to be cloned for research after lawmakers on Wednesday defied conservative Prime Minister John Howard in an emotive parliamentary debate.

Parliament's lower house approved new laws that bring Australia into line with Britain, and some states in the United States, which scientists say will make it easier for Australia to attract medical researchers and allow greater international collaboration.

Howard allowed a rare free vote on the issue in parliament, meaning lawmakers were not bound by their party's stance, but said he opposed any relaxation of the stem cell restrictions during a debate that split all parties in Australia's parliament.

"I don't think the science has shifted enough to warrant the parliament changing its view," Howard said on Wednesday. "I think we do live in an age where we have slid too far into relativism, and there must be some absolutes in our society."

But Australia's lower house of parliament overturned a ban imposed in 2002 that only allowed research on embryos left over from IVF programs.

Church and right-to-life groups strongly opposed the new laws. But prominent medical researchers, including Ian Frazer whose research led to a vaccine for cervical cancer, backed the changes.

The new laws allow stem cells to be cloned for use in research, but will continue bans on importing or exporting cloned embryos, and maintain a ban on placing cloned embryos into a human body or the body of an animal.

The vote is the second parliamentary defeat this year for Australia's Health Minister Tony Abbott, who once trained to be a Catholic priest. He also lost his ministerial right to veto the use of the controversial abortion drug RU-486 in February.

Abbott, a moral conservative, said cloned embryos were indistinguishable from embryos used for IVF, and he urged lawmakers to vote against the laws on moral grounds rather than from concerns about people with chronic disabilities.

"We owe it to the beloved dead to base our policies on our principles, and not on our grief," Abbott said.

But many supporters of the laws spoke of the pain of losing family members, and said Australia could not afford to continue to place limits on stem cell research, which could one day find cures for a range of debilitating conditions.

"Given the solutions to a range of diseases and disabilities could be boosted through this research, I cannot deny a chance of a cure for these people," Special Minister of State Gary Nairn, whose wife died of cancer last year told parliament.

A poll published in June showed strong public support for stem cell research, with 80 percent public support for using cloning techniques to create embryonic stem cells.

Conscience votes are rare and have had mixed results in Australia's parliament.

In 1997, a conscience vote backed Howard's stand to ban voluntary euthanasia, but a conscience vote went against Howard in February to allow wider use of the RU-486 abortion drug.