

INTERNATIONAL
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Australia could become leader in stem cell research if Parliament passes new law

The Associated Press

Scientists say Australia could become a world center for research into diseases such as diabetes and Alzheimer's if Parliament passes legislation being debated this week that would lift a ban on cloning human embryos for stem cell research.

Ending the four-year ban would follow an emotional and unusual debate in Parliament during which lawmakers were released by party leaders from following party lines and given a so-called conscience vote.

The House of Representatives is due to begin debating the bill on Thursday, with no date set for a vote. The bill will become law if the House endorses it.

The upper house Senate narrowly voted 34 to 32 on Nov. 7 to allow therapeutic cloning, which involves removing the nucleus of an unfertilized human egg and adding DNA to make it grow in a lab dish.

The legislation succeeded only after proponents dropped the more contentious aspects which would have allowed the creation of human-animal hybrid embryos.

Scientists had been lobbying for lawmakers to relax the rules and allow therapeutic cloning of embryos for medical research. Since Parliament passed Australia's first laws on stem cell research in 2002, scientists have only been allowed to extract stem cells from spare embryos created for fertility treatments.

Embryonic stem cells, sometimes called "master cells," have the potential to turn into any of the body's cells. Scientists hope to learn how to coax them into growing replacements for damaged tissue, which could lead to treatments or cures for diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, as well as spinal cord injuries, diabetes and arthritis.

Bernie Tuch, a Sydney scientist who is using stem cell research in efforts to create insulin-producing cells as a therapy for diabetes, said Australia could become a center of research excellence if the bill becomes law.

"What it will do is remove blocks to allow pathways of research and discovery in the longer term to be explored in Australia," Tuch said Thursday. "We've certainly fallen behind in recent years in Australia and there's no question that that's because of the slowness and the (legislative) blocks."

British law allows human eggs to be fertilized with sperm to create an embryo specifically for stem cell harvest and the creation of hybrid embryos by combining a human cell nucleus with an animal egg — a measure removed from the Australian bill during the Senate debate.

"Britain will be slightly ahead, at least in terms of legislation, ... but the Australian law will be about 95 percent and that's pretty good and I think it's enough room to move ahead and to start developing," Tuch said.

An opponent of therapeutic cloning, general practitioner, Dr. Tim Coyle, welcomed the Senate's decision to ban any mixing of human and animal tissue.

Coyle told a Senate inquiry into the proposed law in September that mixing animal with human tissue was dangerous and safeguards could not be trusted.

Blending tissues from the two sources would increase the risk of viruses spreading between species, he said in an interview Thursday.

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"That proposal to introduce a human nucleus to an animal I thought was going to be quite dangerous," Coyle said.

Joanna Knotts, who started an advocacy group for medical research after a skiing accident left her a quadriplegic, said she did not envisage any shortage of human eggs for research.

"We're actually being approached by people who are in positions to donate eggs freely," Knotts said of her group, the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research.

"They're perhaps relatives of people with severe conditions and they are willing to donate eggs because they see potential benefits of therapeutic cloning for people with terrible conditions like Parkinson's and motor neurone disease," she said.

If amendments are made to the bill in the lower house, it will have to return to the Senate for those changes to be ratified.

U.S. President George W. Bush and other critics argue the promise of stem cell science should not be realized at the expense of human life, even in its most nascent stages.

Prime Minister John Howard, a close ally of Bush who has led Australia's center-right government for a decade, has recently said he has yet to decide how he will vote on the issue.

Kay Patterson, a government senator who sponsored the bill, said she expected it would pass with a wider margin in the House of Representatives than the razor edge result in the Senate.

Howard was part of a Cabinet decision in June 2002 that the law should not be changed, but he agreed to allow a conscience vote on the issue after government lawmakers threatened to revolt.

Australian Cabinet members, including the prime minister, hold seats in Parliament.

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