

INTERNATIONAL  
**Herald Tribune**

## Scientist: Australia has opened door to stem cell cures

**The Associated Press**

Wednesday, December 6, 2006

CANBERRA, Australia

Australia has thrown open a door to potential new cures by legalizing human embryo cloning, a scientist who had recommended the change said Thursday.

"The field holds considerable potential, and if we had not made this change, then we would have closed the door on that area of potential for Australian scientists to work on," Neuroscientist Peter Schofield told The Associated Press.

The decision has paved the way "for Australian scientists to try to convert the potential into actual development of treatment or, heaven help us, even cures," Schofield said.

Parliament on Wednesday passed a bill that will allow human skin cells to be spliced with human eggs to create embryos in lab dishes in a process known as therapeutic cloning.

Researchers hope the science will lead to cures for conditions such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, as well as spinal cord injuries, diabetes and arthritis.

Parliament passed Australia's first stem cell research laws in 2002, allowing scientists to extract stem cells from spare embryos intended for in vitro fertilization, but preventing cell cloning.

However, a government-appointed expert committee that reviewed those laws recommended a year ago that therapeutic cloning be allowed in the interests of medical science.

The new bill, passed by Parliament in a rare conscience vote, was based on the committee's report.

Schofield, part of the six-member committee, said the change will make Australia more attractive to researchers — as well as research investment in experimental stem cell technology.

"We, as the committee, look forward to seeing some exciting developments happen because it was all about potential," he said.

Schofield, whose Sydney-based research institute plans to use stem cell technology to study schizophrenia, said the close vote in Parliament showed that the committee had struck a balance between community expectations and scientists' needs.

After a passionate three-day debate, the House of Representatives approved the legislation 82-62. The Senate had passed it 34-32 last month.

Schofield said there may be an egg shortage because Parliament had refused to allow the use of animal eggs to create hybrid embryos. It is also illegal to offer women inducements for eggs.

"There might not be enough eggs to do some of the things that people would like," Schofield said. "But my answer to them is: Tough."

"It's not about how much can you squeeze past the community, but rather what is the will of the broad community, and we thought we got it right, and the Parliament has agreed that we did," he said.

But a national association of doctors and scientists, Australians for Ethical Stem Cell Research, accused Parliament of morally damaging Australian society by overturning the ban.

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"Like superstitious peasants, they believed the witch doctors who held out hope of miracle cures from cloning," said the association's national director, David van Gend.

Right to Life Australia spokeswoman Margaret Tighe said "the siren songs of scientists" had seduced lawmakers.

"It's a very black day for Australia and the Australian Parliament because they have, in fact, endorsed the creation of a class of human beings who can be used for the benefit of others," Tighe said.

Kuldip Sidhu, a doctor who heads a Sydney diabetes treatment unit, said Thursday he plans to make the first application for a therapeutic cloning license.

"I am very happy this has come through," he said.

Joanna Knotts, convener of the advocacy group Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, said the vote demonstrated that most lawmakers realized the value of stem cell research.

Knotts, a 40-year-old who became a quadriplegic in a skiing accident 14 years ago, said she hoped the technology could help repair her spinal cord.

"I remain positive every day," Knotts said. "It's incredibly hard living with spinal injury, and I do remain hopeful."

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