

Therapeutic cloning Bill clears Senate hurdle

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A BID to extend stem cell research using cloned human embryos passed its first major hurdle last night with the Senate giving it the green light.

In a rare conscience vote in Parliament, 34 senators voted to overturn a ban on therapeutic cloning.

Another 32 senators voted against former health minister Kay Patterson's controversial private member's Bill.

The Senate's sitting hours were extended as it prepared to consider the Bill all this week but after less than two days of intense and sometimes emotional debate, the vote was taken late yesterday evening.

A successful, last-minute amendment to the legislation by the Australian Democrats specifically ruled out animal-human hybrids.

Another increased from 10 to 15 years the prison sentence for flouting safeguards designed to prevent abuse of embryonic cloning.

At the urging of Liberal senator Richard Colbeck, a final change would force the federal health minister to prepare a report within 18 months on national regulations governing all non-blood human tissue research.

The additional safeguards will only come into effect if the Bill gets the final go-ahead from the House of Representatives, which is where it will now go for MPs to decide on the issue with a conscience vote.

Australian Democrats Senator Natasha Stott Despoja, who had introduced her own Bill to have the research expanded, was overjoyed by the Senate vote.

"This is the happiest day of my parliamentary life," said the senator who will not contest the next election.

"We avoided a Luddite moment; we have done the right thing and created the opportunity for great research to be undertaken."

Despite the additional precautions agreed by the Upper House, some senators remained absolutely opposed to the legislation.

Liberal Senator Julian McGauran had warned of an horrific future peopled with bizarre human-animal mongrels.

"We should not even be creating these array of embryo types listed in the Bill in the first place," he said.

"It has all the pride equal to a Nuremberg rally - a rally of Dr Strangeloves chanting for such weird experiments as the creation of hybrid embryos, mixing humans with animals," he said.

But Australian Democrats senator Andrew Murray had no fears about the emergence of Frankenstein-like monsters.

"I do not fear that I will live to see centaurs, minotaurs or satyrs," he said.

"I do not fear that Frankenstein will be regenerated.

"I do not fear mad scientists will pervert the intention of this legislation."

Minister for Ageing Santo Santoro said there was simply not enough evidence that stem cells from cloned human embryos would produce the expected medical breakthroughs.

Nationals Senator Ron Boswell said the Bill could not be improved to his satisfaction.

"I don't believe you can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and this is certainly a sow's ear," he said.

"I don't think you can improve this Bill. You might do it at the margins, but it is still cloning."

Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan said the stem cell debate had been "emotional and political blackmail".

But the woman behind the laws, Senator Patterson, reached into history to argue for courage in medical research.

"Maybe (opponents of the Bill) would rather take us back 200 years when Edward Jenner produced a cowpox vaccine against smallpox," she said.

His work had been ridiculed amid fears people would grow the horns and tail of a cow and dismissed as loathsome, dangerous and immoral, but was one of the most effective public health advances of its time, she said.

After the Bill was passed, Senator Patterson said she was conscious of the fact that many people suffering from debilitating diseases now would not see the benefits of stem cell research.

But she hoped that future generations would.

"I've done what I needed to do," she said.

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