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Cloning bill has numbers

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THE Senate looks almost certain to clear the way for scientists to conduct experiments involving therapeutic cloning.

Supporters of a private member's bill to be debated next week are confident they will have the numbers to win the conscience ballot despite intensifying lobbying against the move by churches and pro-life groups.

Their optimism came yesterday as a telephone survey by The Australian pointed to a tight vote, with 26 senators in favour, 22 against and 23 undecided or unwilling to reveal their views.

But number crunchers on both sides said that of the undeclared senators, at least 10 were expected to support the bill - enough to make the 36 votes required for victory.

They said only seven of the undeclared looked likely to voteno, leaving a further six votes truly undecided, including those of several senators who might vote yes if given minor amendments.

Analysts also agree that if the bill passes through the Senate, it is certain to win approval in the House of Representatives.

The bill, put forward by former health minister Kay Patterson, would lift a ban on cloning, also known as somatic nuclear cell transfer.

Under the research technique, a scientist injects adult genetic material into a human or animal egg which has had its nucleus removed. The resulting embryo is grown for up to 14 days and stripped of stem cells for use in research and creation of therapies to treat diseases.

While supporters see cloning as a means to cure illness, critics balk at the creation of human life for research purposes.

Supporters of the bill said the only remaining obstacle to its passage was increasing pressure from interest groups and fears by some senators that voting for the law could cost them their electoral preselection.

"Some states have not yet completed their preselection seasons," said one senator.

"It's true that some people might vote against this bill even though they agree with it."

One senator behind the push to block the bill said many had now conceded that it would win Senate approval.

The comments came as opponents continued to flood senators with emails on cloning.

A website linked to the Australian Christian Lobby, which can be used as a platform from which to email a politician, has been the origin of more than 7000 emails in the past week and 17,149 since the debate began.

More than 11,800 people have signed the site's online petition opposing the bill. The email flood continued as cloning opponents rejected a report produced on Monday by the Senate's community affairs committee, which voted 5-3 to recommend that the

bill be passed.

Catholic Health Australia chief executive Francis Sullivan said the report showed the scientific community was far from settled on the need to clone embryos. "The report does canvass many issues but fails to face head-on the fundamental issue at stake - that scientists wish to deliberately create human life to directly destroy it," he said.

Australian Federation of Right to Life Associations spokeswoman Kath Woolf said the Senate report was biased.

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