

Stem cell cloning ban overturned

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AUSTRALIAN scientists will be able to create cloned human embryos after federal Parliament voted to overturn a ban on the research in a rare conscience vote.

The decision gives hope to thousands of Australians living with debilitating diseases.

Liberal Senator Kay Patterson's private member's Bill will allow researchers to clone embryos using donor eggs and cells without sperm and extract their stem cells for medical research.

The Bill succeeded despite Prime Minister John Howard and new Labor leader Kevin Rudd speaking against it at the 11th hour.

Mr Howard said he struggled with his decision, but ultimately decided he could not support the legislation despite his respect for the late John Lockhart, who chaired the Government-appointed stem cell review committee and recommended ending the ban.

"I don't think the science has shifted enough to warrant the Parliament changing its view (since the 2002 vote to ban therapeutic cloning)," he said.

Following his speech, Mr Howard went into the public gallery and embraced Mr Lockhart's wife, Juliet.

Mr Rudd said he found it very difficult to support a law that would allow human life to be created for the single and explicit purpose of experimentation and ultimate destruction.

Senior cabinet ministers Peter Costello, Tony Abbott and Kevin Andrews also spoke against the technology.

Parliament was given only its second conscience vote of the year on the legislation, following a vote on the abortion drug RU486 in February.

But after an emotional four-day debate, the final vote was an anti-climax, with MPs electing not to call a division and have their choice recorded.

An earlier conscience vote, on whether debate should continue to a third reading, returned an 82 to 62 result.

The House of Representatives also voted down an amendment that had threatened to scuttle the legislation.

The change would have prevented stem cells being extracted from the eggs of aborted late term female foetuses, but this procedure will remain acceptable under the Bill.

Liberal MP Michael Ferguson's amendment would have sent the Bill back to the Senate, where it passed by only two votes last month.

Many MPs expressed fears it would not have survived a second review.

Speaking after the vote, Senator Patterson, a former health minister, thanked Mr Howard for giving MPs a free vote and congratulated the members on the debate.

The majority of the more than 100 MPs who spoke on the Bill were in favour of changing the law.

Education and Science Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister Brendan Nelson said the legislation was a chance for Parliament to give hope to sufferers of conditions like diabetes and motor neurone disease.

Dr Nelson said his brother, who died just over two years ago from chronic disease, lived his last years inspired and energised by his search for a cure.

"My generation ... has benefited enormously from the sacrifices, scientific endurance and judgment of those who pioneered not only difficult research but also legislative frontiers," he told Parliament.

"We owe it to the next generation no less to show the same wisdom and indeed the same courage."

Ms Bishop said much progress had been made in the field of embryonic stem cell research in recent years and the hopes of many injured and sick Australians rested with the researchers.

"I cannot, in all conscience, stand in the way of the only ray of hope available to sufferers of devastating and debilitating disease and injury," she said.

But Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews said Parliament was agreeing to treat humans as commodities in passing the Bill.

"Instead of nurturing our offspring, we as a species will have agreed to plunder them," he said.

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