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Embryo cloning gets the go-ahead

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AUSTRALIAN scientists will be able to clone human embryos for medical research under legislation passed by Parliament which divided the country's most senior politicians.

In a rare conscience vote, the House of Representatives passed the controversial measures despite the Prime Minister urging MPs to vote against the bill because it eroded some of society's most absolute values.

The new Opposition Leader, Kevin Rudd, also opposed the legislation, saying it crossed a fundamental ethical threshold by allowing human life to be created for the purpose of scientific experimentation.

During his speech on the bill last night, Mr Rudd became emotional when he recalled the suffering of his mother from Parkinson's disease: "Mum died two years ago so she is not here to ask about this [bill]."

Despite prominent opponents, the bill passed by 20 votes.

The bill has been strongly supported by medical research organisations because they say it widens the scope for eventual development of treatments for crippling and lethal diseases.

The vote split both the Government and the Opposition because MPs were free to vote according to their consciences rather than along party lines.

John Howard was joined in voting against the bill by the Treasurer, Peter Costello, the Deputy Prime Minister, Mark Vaile, the Health Minister, Tony Abbott, as well as Mr Rudd and Labor MPs Peter Garrett, Gavan O'Connor and Tony Burke.

Those in favour of the bill included cabinet ministers Brendan Nelson, Julie Bishop, Ian Macfarlane, Alexander Downer and Philip Ruddock and Labor frontbenchers Julia Gillard, Simon Crean, Jenny Macklin and Wayne Swan.

Opponents failed in a last-ditch attempt to amend the bill to prohibit use of foetal tissue for cloning, a measure critics said would mean aborted female foetuses would be harvested to extract eggs for the creation of embryos.

Speaking in the debate, Mr Howard said he had wrestled with the moral issues at stake, trying to resolve the tension between the benefits of medical research and the moral doubts over whether it was acceptable to experiment on embryos.

But in the end he had not been convinced that the scientific evidence justified changing the existing prohibition on so-called therapeutic cloning.

"I think we live in an age where we have slid too far into relativism," he said. "There must be some absolutes in our society."

Mr Rudd said: "I find it very difficult to support a legal regime which allows creation of a form of

human life with the single purpose of allowing the conduct of experimentation. I am concerned with the crossing of such an ethical threshold and where it may lead in the long term."

The legislation would allow the cloning of embryos for research through somatic cell nuclear transfer, commonly called therapeutic cloning.

The House of Representatives vote follows a narrow one-vote majority in the Senate in favour of the private member's bill introduced by the former health minister Kay Patterson.

In a decision which shocked supporters of the legislation, Mr Costello earlier yesterday spoke strongly against it. He said he was not convinced by the legislation's 14-day limit on the life of cloned embryos, which was a shifting line and one "I would not anchor legislation on". Mr Costello supported the 2002 legislation allowing stem cell research on embryos produced by IVF.

Mr Abbott, an avowed opponent of cloning, acknowledged that even though he was opposed, he could not say how he would respond if the process led to a treatment which could save a loved one.

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