

## Crunch time for cloning

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Vicious personal attacks and bullying are being employed to win the battle over therapeutic cloning. The Christian fundamentalists consider it their last stand, writes Matthew Franklin

HAVING been a detective in Victoria's organised crime and anti-terrorism squad, Jason Wood doesn't bow to stand-over tactics. However, as a first-term Liberal from the marginal seat of La Trobe, Wood, 38, is learning that strong-arm tactics are as common in politics as the underworld, especially when contentious issues are in play.

Early this year, constituents subjected Wood to thinly veiled threats about his political future should he back a move to make the abortion drug RU486 available in Australia without the need for approval by federal Health Minister Tony Abbott.

And with parliament poised to consider legalising the contentious research technique of therapeutic cloning, he's expecting more of the same treatment.

"As a marginal seat holder I've got no doubt I'll have, as I did before, groups, not threatening, but indicating [I'll] be making a very bad decision," Wood says. "But you have to forget about your margin and you have to do what you believe is right."

Cloning supporters say it offers a pathway to better treatment for deadly diseases including Alzheimer's, motor neurone disease and cancer. Critics argue it devalues human life by creating human embryos specifically for the purposes of research and destruction.

Because the issue involves the collision of science, morality, ethics and religion, it is attracting widespread attention from church groups, scientists and lobbyists strongly committed to either side of the argument.

A rumour swept parliament late last month that one senior Liberal was bullying colleagues by telling them the debate was not about science v religion but about the struggle between the Left and Right within the Liberal Party. And one email correspondent labelled Australian Democrats senator Natasha Stott Despoja a baby killer because she supported therapeutic cloning. A website associated with the Australian Christian Lobby has provided a platform for users to fire off more than 5000 emails to MPs, some containing vicious personal attacks.

As parliament plays host to a parade of priests, scientists, sufferers of diseases and assorted lobbyists, the political temperature is rising, particularly for marginal seat holders such as Wood. They know that whatever they decide, they are likely to offend. MPs inclined to back therapeutic cloning fear they will anger fundamentalist religious groups and churches will spill open with people happy to cast their vote on a single contentious issue such as therapeutic cloning, also known as somatic cell nuclear transfer or SCNT.

"A lot of my colleagues are saying they are worried about the political implications," Wood says. "I tell them to vote for what they think is right and stick to it."

Visiting US adult stem cell researcher James Sherley, enlisted by the newly formed Doctors Against Cloning, arrived in Canberra on Tuesday to talk to MPs. He accuses fellow scientists of overstating the potential benefits of cloning and says although many scientists and MPs

back cloning because they genuinely want to alleviate human suffering, they forget about the embryos created for the technology.

"To make embryonic stem cells, currently, there's a requirement to destroy human life," Sherley says.

As with abortion, the therapeutic cloning debate boils down to an individual's view of when human life begins. And as MPs' in-boxes begin to fill, many are experiencing a sense of *deja vu*. Four years ago parliament rejected therapeutic cloning during an often emotional debate that set the parameters for embryonic stem cell research using embryos left over from in-vitro fertilisation treatments. That debate resolved the issue should be re-examined after two years.

The resulting review was chaired by former judge John Lockhart and called for legalisation of therapeutic cloning. It was a wide-ranging review of Australia's anti-cloning and embryo research legislation. It also convened across the country, canvassing community attitudes to stem cell research, and received more than 1000 submissions. The report was tabled in parliament in December.

However, the issue almost did not make it on to the political agenda. Cabinet initially rejected Lockhart's recommendations after hearing a submission from the relevant minister, Santo Santoro, a staunch Catholic publicly opposed to the change.

But when this triggered a minor backbench revolt from angry moderates, John Howard cut his losses. The Prime Minister conceded the ground had moved in recent years and agreed to a debate to be resolved on a conscience vote, just like the RU486 debate earlier this year and the original embryonic research debate.

Among those who believe there is no need for a fresh debate is Abbott. Another devout Catholic, Abbott says nothing has changed in two years.

And he has angered opponents by warning that one of the Lockhart recommendations -- that doctors should be able to use rabbit eggs instead of human eggs as part of therapeutic cloning to remove the need for invasive harvesting -- will produce human-animal hybrids, drawing criticism that he is beating up the facts into a Frankenstein scenario and preying on public ignorance about the science.

However others, including Doctors Against Cloning, back Abbott's position and stress opposition to therapeutic cloning is not a spiritual issue but one of basic morality.

The organisation has sent to every MP a letter signed by 185 doctors who want them to know that not all scientists and doctors support therapeutic cloning.

"You don't need any particular spiritual position to be against cloning," convener Megan Best says. "The science is against it."

There is yet another dimension at play: money. The Victorian and Queensland governments have a financial stake in the argument. Both have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years developing infrastructure promoting job-creating investment in science, particularly biotechnology.

Victorian Premier Steve Bracks and Queensland counterpart Peter Beattie fear that failure to lift the therapeutic cloning ban will scuttle their efforts and cost jobs.

Their fears echo those of scientists across the nation who have warned of a brain drain if Australian scientists are denied permission to conduct experiments already legal in Britain and parts of the US. So far Australia has lost three internationally respected stem cell scientists to overseas positions. One of the three, Martin Pera, studies adult stem cells but backs therapeutic cloning.

So the stage is set and things are starting to get nasty.

One MP, who supports therapeutic cloning and has asked not to be named, says anti-therapeutic cloners are questioning whether advocates have financial interests in the research sector, inferring their stand is based on their pockets rather than a desire to help scientists cure disease. He says "the fundamentalists", who were beaten on stem cell research in 2002 and RU486 last February, feel they are losing influence.

^ It's a bit like the Alamo," the MP says. "It's their last stand."

Between now and the first week of November, it will be a case of experts at 20 paces. Parliament's pro-lobbyists are out in force, including former health minister Kay Patterson, who has produced a private member's bill on the issue. Patterson is being backed by South Australian Liberal senator Jeannie Ferris and West Australian Liberal Mal Washer, a doctor and passionate supporter of the technology.

Advocates have already held a public forum featuring experts on the Lockhart committee and Australian of the Year Ian Frazer.

Opponents, including Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews, Tasmanian Liberal senator Guy Barnett, former Nationals leader John Anderson and Nationals senator Ron Boswell, have also been active. They held a forum last month in which Brisbane adult stem cell researcher Alan Mackay-Sim said therapeutic cloning was unnecessary because his research showed more promise.

Sherley was in Canberra until yesterday and the Parliamentary Library hosted further meetings yesterday and on Tuesday featuring experts from both sides of the debate.

And, in the background, the Senate's Community Affairs Legislation Committee is holding an inquiry into therapeutic cloning that will feature public hearings in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney during the next fortnight. Submissions to the inquiry are expected to be dominated by church and scientific organisations and will be released in coming days.

Back in his office in Parliament House, Wood says it will be hard to change his mind despite the hullabaloo.

Rather than become a hostage to spin, Wood recently visited the Australian Stem Cell Research Centre in Melbourne to talk to experts about the potential of their research. He left convinced that therapeutic cloning was the way of the future.

"I'm the kind of person who makes up his mind and sticks with it," he says. "It takes a tougher man than me to look some little kid in the eye who may have spina bifida and say: ^ I'm going to give you no hope."

Matthew Franklin is a political and health reporter with The Australian.

#### PROBLEMATIC PROCEDURE

\* THERAPEUTIC cloning involves removing the DNA-bearing nucleus from a human egg and replacing it with genetic material from another person's cells. Those cells could come from skin, blood or other accessible tissue.

\* Under suitable laboratory conditions the genetically altered cell will develop into an early embryo, or blastocyst, containing roughly 200 cells. The blastocyst contains embryonic stem cells, which can grow into virtually any tissue in the body.

\* The ES cells are collected and used to create colonies, or lines, of specialised cells; for instance, heart or muscle cells. The remaining blastocyst is discarded.

\* The cell lines can be used to study the molecular basis of disorders such as heart disease or muscular dystrophy if they are grown from cells from patients with the diseases.

\* They may also be used to grow healthy tissue for patients suffering from those or other conditions. In theory, the new tissue can be reintroduced into the donor patient's body without the risk of rejection.

\* Supporters believe therapeutic cloning may lead to improved treatments for debilitating diseases, such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, or for conditions such as spinal cord or brain injury.

\* Opponents say the procedure creates human life (the blastocyst), then destroys it. They also fear that ES cells could become cancerous and that women may be coerced into producing eggs.

Countdown to the debate

\* October 20: Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee hears evidence in Canberra

\* October 23: Committee sits in Sydney

\* October 24: Committee sits in Melbourne

\* October 27: Committee report due

\* November 6: Senate begins debating private member's bill

\* November 27: Bill enters House of Representatives

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