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Committee backs therapeutic cloning

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Opponents of embryonic stem cell research have been dealt a blow after a bipartisan parliamentary committee backed moves to overturn a ban on therapeutic cloning.

The Senate community affairs committee examined the expert Lockhart review, which earlier this year recommended allowing cloning for stem cell research, and two bills that would give it legislative effect.

The committee's 174-page report, tabled on Monday, outlines arguments both supporting and opposing the technology, in order to help MPs who will have a conscience vote on the issue next month.

The two authors of private member's bills seeking to overturn the current legislation, Australian Democrats senator Natasha Stott Despoja and Liberal senator and former health minister Kay Patterson, were members of the committee.

"The committee was divided on acceptance of the two bills," the report says.

"However, a majority of the committee agreed emphatically to support, and to recommend that senators vote for, the Patterson bill."

Five members of the committee - the two bill authors and Labor senator Claire Moore, Liberal senator Judith Adams, Tasmanian Labor senator Carol Brown - voted in favour of change.

Three members, including the committee's chair, Liberal senator Gary Humphries, Liberal senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells and Labor senator Helen Polley voted against it.

Thirty-six hours have been set aside for debate on the bills in the Senate, beginning November 6. A vote will be taken before the upper house rises on the Friday afternoon, Senator Patterson said.

The Senate sitting has been extended from November 9 until Friday, November 10, to accommodate the debate, a spokesman for the Government Whip in the Senate, Jeannie Ferris, said.

Senator Patterson believes the report will affect swaying MPs and senators' views, but said the committee process firmed members' existing views about the Lockhart recommendations, rather than changing them.

"I think they will look at the submission and look at the report as part of their decision making," she told AAP.

"Of course, this is a free vote. People will make the decision themselves. I don't think we will know until the bill is put at the end of the week."

Health Minister Tony Abbott, a Catholic who strongly opposes therapeutic cloning, said he would be surprised if the report changed his view.

Senator Patterson said she was overwhelmed by the number of scientists and advocate groups who gave evidence or submissions to the inquiry in support of the Lockhart recommendations.

The committee considered 494 submissions and held public hearings in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne.

Senator Stott Despoja plans to move amendments to Senator Patterson's bill as, she said, the committee preferred some sections of her exposure bill to Senator Patterson's.

Scientists hope stem cell research eventually will lead to treatments or cures for conditions ranging from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases to spinal cord injury, diabetes and arthritis.

The report's majority found claims that reputable scientists were hyping the potential of this research were "inappropriate" and that a significant number of peer-reviewed journal articles demonstrated research had progressed since 2002.


But Tasmanian Liberal Senator Guy Barnett, who contributed to the report, said the case for change had not been made.

"The arguments in 2002 that it is wrong to create a human embryo for the purposes of research and its destruction are equally valid today," Senator Barnett told AAP.

In a conscience vote in 2002, parliament passed legislation that allows scientists to extract stem cells from spare IVF embryos, but prevents embryos being created for their stem cells in a process known as therapeutic cloning.

The bills would maintain a ban on reproductive cloning, in which a cloned embryo is implanted in a woman's womb.

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