

Domestic news

Stem cell debate to begin in parliament

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Parliament takes on a different hue as senators use their conscience rather than political allegiance to begin debating whether to overturn a ban on therapeutic cloning.

Politicians have been given a rare conscience vote on the future of embryonic stem cell research, and will start debate the bill in the Senate on Monday afternoon.

Federal parliament voted in 2002 to ban human cloning and allow only spare embryos left over from IVF procedures to be used for stem cell research, with a review from December 2004.

The Lockhart committee this year recommended changing the laws to allow therapeutic cloning for stem cell research.

Liberal senator Kay Patterson - who oversaw the current stem cell laws during a stint as health minister - has drafted a bill giving effect to Lockhart's recommendations.

The Senate's sitting times have been extended to accommodate the expected lengthy and emotive debate, with a vote to take place before parliament rises on Friday.

Should the legislation pass the Senate, MPs in the House of Representatives will also be given a conscience vote.

While a handful of politicians are on the record as being for or against relaxing the stem cell rules, many are yet to publicly reveal their position or predict the likely outcome of the vote.

Labor's health spokeswoman Julia Gillard says it will be a close race, while Liberal MP Mal Washer believes it will pass but claims some MPs will vote against it to protect their political careers.

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