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Embryo cells can be used

LAURA ANDERSON, POLITICAL REPORTER

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AUSTRALIAN scientists will be allowed to use embryonic stem cells created by therapeutic cloning to seek cures for a range of debilitating diseases, after a Bill to legalise the move passed Parliament last night.

The Bill received a resounding 82-62 majority in a vote by the nation's Lower House MPs - despite last-minute appeals by passionate opponents of the Bill for their colleagues to reject the "unethical" legislation.

Prime Minister John Howard and new Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd revealed late yesterday they could not support the Bill, sponsored by former health minister Senator Kay Patterson.

Mr Howard said he had done a lot of "personal searching" and consulted with those close to him when reaching his decision. "In the end, you have to take a stand for some absolutes in our society and I think what we are talking about here is a moral absolute," he said.

Mr Rudd, who struggled to speak of his late mother's battle with Parkinson's disease, said he could not support the Bill. He said, however, the debate was one in which no side should argue an "absolute moral position".

Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer supported the legislation, as did Liberal MP Dr Andrew Southcott and Labor's Steve Georganas and Rod Sawford. The majority of South Australian MPs, however, Labor's Kate Ellis, and Liberal MPs Kym Richardson, Trish Draper, Patrick Secker, Barry Wakelin, David Fawcett and Christopher Pyne voted against the move.

A proposed amendment, to stop the use of eggs from aborted fetuses to create human embryos, failed to receive majority support.

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