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Emotional stem cell debate underway

November 6, 2006 - 2:34AM

An emotive ethical debate is underway in the Senate over legislation that would permit scientists to create cloned embryos for research purposes.

After weeks of intense lobbying, the upper house on Monday began considering a private member's bill from former health minister Kay Patterson that seeks to overturn a ban on producing embryos for stem cell research.

Existing stem cell laws limit scientists to using surplus sperm-and-egg embryos left over from IVF procedures.

Advocates of stem cell research say it offers potential medical breakthroughs, while opponents raise ethical concerns about creating cloned embryos and then destroying them in the name of science.

In the first four hours of debate, which precedes a rare conscience vote on the issue, 10 senators spoke in favour of passing the bill and six opposed it.

Victorian Liberal Mitch Fifield said he would not support the bill because it allowed the creation of cloned human embryos that had the potential to become human beings.

"I understand and accept that no one is proposing that any of these new sorts of embryos be implanted into a woman," he said.

"Even if they were, they would be unlikely to thrive. But I cannot cross the line to create cloned human embryos that have the theoretical potential to become cloned human beings."

Liberal senator Gary Humphries went further, suggesting that passing the bill would put scientists on a slippery slope to human cloning, as embryos would have potential for independent existence.

"The clear ethical boundary we seek will be behind us, not in front of us," Senator Humphries said.

Tasmanian Liberal Guy Barnett, whose father died of motor neurone disease, said cloning of animals such as Dolly the sheep had not provided any beneficial medical treatments.

"Dolly the sheep is now dead," Senator Barnett told parliament.

"Dolly was created using the same cloning techniques to be legalised under the cloning bill currently before the Senate.

"Animal cloning has delivered no safe health therapies."

But Democrats senator Natasha Stott Despoja said while stem cell research did not offer immediate miracle cures, enough evidence existed to suggest it had promising potential to deliver future medical benefits.

She said Australia could lose its leading scientists if research restraints remained.

Northern Territory Labor senator Trish Crossin said existing sufferers of diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's knew embryonic stem cell research would not provide cures for them, but it might offer treatments in the years ahead.

Greens senator Kerry Nettle foreshadowed an amendment calling for a stem cell bank to be established within two years to ensure the public could benefit from research.

Liberal senator Judith Troeth accused opponents of the bill of using dirty tactics and making false claims about what the legislation would allow.

The bill did not permit human reproductive cloning and prohibited the development of human-animal hybrids, Senator Troeth said.

Prime Minister John Howard has not yet made up his mind on how to vote.

"I am wrestling with this issue," Mr Howard told reporters.

"On the one hand I want to do everything possible to help relieve suffering and to leave open the hope of cures for terrible debilitating illnesses.

"On the other hand, I do have concerns that this may in some areas be a step too far.


"I am still weighing the matter. I envy those people who think it's so simple.

"Some of these things aren't so simple as people pretend."

The proposed laws closely follow the recommendations of the expert Lockhart review, which earlier this year said the ban on therapeutic cloning should be changed.

Thirty-six hours have been set aside for debate and a vote will be taken before the Senate rises on Friday.

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