

[Home](#) » [National](#) » [Breaking News](#) » Article

Firm on both sides of stem cell debate

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A consulting firm who found no justification for changing therapeutic cloning laws later helped a Liberal MP draft legislation seeking to overturn the present ban.

The health department referred Senator Kay Patterson to Canberra-based firm mpconsulting to help draft her private member's bill, which seeks to make the expert Lockhart review's recommendations law.

The government had previously commissioned mpconsulting to examine the Lockhart review and relied on the firm's report in deciding to ignore the Lockhart recommendations.

Lockhart recommended the government change laws that restrict research to spare IVF embryos, and allow scientists to create embryos for the purpose of producing stem cells.

The mpconsulting report, which the government received in June, found little has changed scientifically or ethically since parliament voted to ban therapeutic cloning in 2002.

It said the Lockhart report did not provide any information regarding scientific developments since 2002 that would justify changes to the legislation.

Cabinet in June voted not to change the laws but, following a backbench rebellion, Mr Howard has agreed to a conscience vote should any legislation come before parliament.

Senator Patterson's bill will be debated in the Senate from November 6 and a vote will be taken before it rises on Friday afternoon.

Questioning at Senate budget estimates hearings revealed Ageing Minister Santo Santoro, following approval from the prime minister's office, asked the health department to organise technical assistance for Senator Patterson in preparing her bill.

The health department referred the senator to the firm, who charged \$22,000 for the help.


The same firm also helped draft the original stem cell legislation, which banned therapeutic cloning, Department of Health and Ageing secretary Jane Halton said.

Labor's health spokeswoman Julia Gillard has previously suggested the government had bought mpconsulting's opinion on the Lockhart report.

"The Howard government is pretty good at getting the advice it wants to hear," she told AAP.

Senator Santoro said he gave approval for the firm to help so the "best possible bill" could be debated in parliament.

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