

# MPs give all-clear to clone embryos

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SCIENTISTS have been given the all-clear to conduct experiments using cloned human embryos, despite impassioned pleas to reject the research by John Howard, newly elected Labor leader Kevin Rudd and a group of senior government ministers.

Mr Rudd appeared close to tears last night in the debate on the conscience vote as he told parliament how he missed his mother Margaret since her death two years ago after a battle with Parkinson's disease.

But the new Opposition Leader said that despite his grief - and his support for the original stem-cell research bill in 2002 - he could not support a law that would legalise therapeutic cloning, even though scientists believed it could lead to a cure for the degenerative disease.

The House of Representatives later voted 82 to 62 to legalise therapeutic cloning, a process in which adult genetic material is injected into a human egg that has had its nucleus removed to create an embryo, which is then stripped of stem cells for research.

Passage of the bill, drafted by former health minister Kay Patterson, came despite a last-ditch bid by opponents to amend the legislation to prohibit scientists from using eggs from aborted late-term fetuses for research.

Pro-cloners stayed solid amid fears that if the bill were amended it would be defeated in the Senate, which last month passed the legislation in its original form by a single vote.

Mr Rudd's deputy Julia Gillard, a cloning advocate, warned that an amended bill could be defeated in the Senate. "It is a difficult choice, I agree with that," Ms Gillard said. "But it's a choice the house has to make."

The amendment was lost 76 to 53, and the bill went through the rest of the proceedings without a formal division.

The often-emotional conscience debate was triggered by the report earlier this year by a government-appointed committee led by the late former judge John Lockhart recommending the research be allowed under strict limits preventing embryos being allowed to develop for more than 14 days.

As Mr Lockhart's widow Juliet watched from the gallery, Mr Rudd described his mother as "a Catholic from central casting" and said he sought her advice in 2002 when parliament debated a law that would allow scientists to conduct stem-cell research using excess embryos created through IVF treatment.

Mr Rudd, who succeeded Kim Beazley at Labor's helm on Monday, said his mother told him it was a matter for his conscience but that because the embryos had been created to help childless couples, the research might be acceptable. "Mum died two years ago, so she's not here to ask this one," Mr Rudd said.

He then paused for 16 seconds, clearly struggling with his grief, before saying that supporting cloning crossed a moral boundary which made him uncomfortable.

The Prime Minister also rejected the cloning bill, saying it involved a descent in relativism about human life.

"There must be some absolutes in our society," Mr Howard said. "To vote in favour of this bill is to embrace a relativism on society and its value of human life and what leads to it which does, to use that cliché, get us terribly close if not on to the slippery slope. It is a very big step to do."

But Human Services Minister Joe Hockey said he was unwilling to deny hope to the thousands of Australians suffering diseases for which cures might be found using cloning. "I have no ethical objections that outweigh the enormous benefits this may provide future generations," Mr Hockey said. "Providing people with hope is no longer the exclusive domain of religion. I believe anything we can do to improve the quality of life for human beings we should do."

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