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MPs' vote expands stem cell research - ACT

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Australian scientists will be able to create cloned human embryos in their quest for new treatments for incurable diseases after Federal Parliament voted to overturn a ban on the research.

In a rare conscience vote last night, a majority of MPs supported Liberal senator Kay Patterson's Bill to expand embryonic stem cell research.

The former health minister, Senator Patterson, said the legislation would take effect in six months when scientists could apply for licences and seek funding for their research.

"We're not going to see a slather of experiments and research. We're going to see steady, incremental work in this area both here and overseas," she said after the vote.

MPs cast their final vote shortly before 8pm but the outcome was clear less than two hours earlier when members voted 82 to 62 that the Bill be read a second time.

Liberal MP Michael Ferguson went on to move an amendment to stop the use of eggs from aborted females to create human embryos, but this was also defeated.

The result came after days of debate in the House of Representatives where some MPs shared very personal and painful experiences to make the case for or against the legislation.

Political foes found themselves on the same side, while party colleagues were divided in their views.

Prime Minister John Howard, Deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile, Treasurer Peter Costello, Health Minister Tony Abbott and Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd were in the "no" camp.

But Defence Minister Brendan Nelson, Education Minister Julie Bishop and Deputy Opposition Leader Julia Gillard backed the Bill.

Opponents argued the change would cross an ethical boundary in creating human life and destroying it for research.

Supporters believed the move would potentially pave the way for new treatments for conditions such as Alzheimer's disease, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis and Type 1 diabetes.

But last night, Parliament gave the green light for an expansion of embryonic stem cell research as recommended by an expert committee chaired by the late Justice John Lockhart. His widow, Juliet, watched from the public gallery as the events unfolded.

Licensed scientists, who could currently use surplus IVF embryos, would now be allowed to create embryos, grow them for up to 14 days and extract stem cells for research.

This technique was called somatic cell nuclear transfer, or therapeutic cloning, or somatic cell nuclear transfer.

Mr Howard decided to oppose the Bill after "personal searching" and talking with those close to him.

"I've decided to vote against this legislation for the reason that in the end you have to take a stand for some absolutes in our society," he said.

"And I think what we're talking about here is a moral absolute and that is why I cannot support the legislation."

He found common ground with newly elected Opposition Leader Mr Rudd whose mother, Margaret, was a "Catholic from central casting" and had the "truly terrible" Parkinson's disease.

Mr Rudd sought his mother's views four years ago when MPs considered the legislation that allowed researchers to use surplus IVF embryos.

"Mum died two years ago so she's not here to ask about this one," Mr Rudd said.

He became visibly upset, took a long pause and went on to outline his ethical objections to the legislation.

"I find it very difficult to support a legal regime that supports the creation of a human life for the single and explicit purpose of experimentation on that human life," he said.

Cancer survivor Mr Vaile shared this position, saying the Bill was "morally wrong". "It is an example of how good people can be seduced by the prospect of miracles into making terrible mistakes," Mr Vaile said.

Dr Nelson a former Australian Medical Association president supported the Bill because "we owe it to the next generation".

"Hope is the most fragile yet powerful of human emotions. There is no such thing as false hope. There is only hope,"

Dr Nelson said.

"My mother lost one of her two sons to a chronic disease a little over a decade ago. He lived the last two years of his life inspired and energised by what would ultimately be the quixotic search for a cure."

Education Minister Julie Bishop supported the Bill because she could not "stand in the way of the only ray of hope available to sufferers of devastating and debilitating disease and injury".

Health Minister Tony Abbott, who also opposed the legislation, said this was a debate about the ethical boundaries for research.

"I imagine that every single Member of this Parliament would recoil with indignation at the suggestion that he or she support human experimentation," Mr Abbott said.

"I regret to say the only difference between fully blown human experimentation and what's permitted in this Bill is time."

Source: The Canberra Times

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