

INTERNATIONAL
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Parliament debates Australian ban on stem cell cloning

The Associated Press

Lawmakers told painful stories of loved ones suffering from disease as Australia's Parliament began debating a bill Thursday that would lift the country's ban on cloning human embryos for stem cell research.

The House of Representatives debate comes after the legislation narrowly passed through the Senate by a 34-32 vote on Nov. 7.

Scientists hope stem cell research will eventually lead to treatments or cures for conditions including Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, as well as spinal cord injuries, diabetes and arthritis.

Parliament passed Australia's first laws on stem cell research in 2002, allowing scientists to extract stem cells from spare embryos intended for in vitro fertilization but preventing cell cloning.

The bill would allow therapeutic cloning, the splicing of skin cells with eggs to produce stem cells, also known as master cells, which are capable of forming all the tissues of the human body.

The debate was adjourned until Monday after 13 lawmakers gave speeches supporting the reforms for the sake of sufferers of chronic disease and nine denounced the bill as promoting unproven science that did not respect the human rights of the unborn.

Government lawmaker Gary Nairn said the death of his wife from cancer last year made him appreciate the need to help scientists further their search for a cure.

"For people suffering from these conditions ... hope is all they have to keep them going," Nairn told Parliament. "I cannot deny ... the chance of a cure for these people."

Opposition lawmaker Julia Irwin recalled her father's death from the degenerative neurological disease Huntington's and the realization that there was a 50 percent chance that she could have inherited the disease and passed it on to her children and grandchildren. She has since been cleared of the disease.

"You may be able to understand why I could not slam shut the door that may lead to treatments that prevent the ravages of diseases like Huntington's," Irwin said, adding that she would support the bill.

Independent lawmaker Peter Andren said research from adult stem cells was showing more promising results than embryonic stem cell research which, under the proposed legislation, is likely to lead to the exploitation of women for their eggs.


"This is about creating life in order to dismantle it," Andren said.

"Why don't we free up the many millions to be spent on this ethically indefensible research and redirect it to improve the living conditions of those hundreds of millions of people around the world who will never enjoy the benefits of Western medical research and who are battling diseases long controlled in the West?" he asked.

Before the debate began, several lawmakers both for and against the reforms said they expected the legislation would pass.

Introducing the bill, government lawmaker Mal Washer warned legislators they had to accept the legislation in its current form because the Senate would not endorse any alteration. Amendments made

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in the House must go back to the Senate for a vote.

"Any attempt to have further amendments in this House will be totally unacceptable as we all know the bill would not survive a review by the Senate," Washer told Parliament, without elaborating.

Washer said replacing the nucleus of an unfertilized human egg with another human's DNA to create stem cells in a lab dish was already allowed in countries including the United States, United Kingdom, Sweden, Singapore and China.

Prime Minister John Howard said he had yet to decide what side he will take when the bill is expected to be voted on next week. All parties are allowing their lawmakers to vote according to their consciences rather than follow a party line.

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