

THE Daily Telegraph

Stem cell 'scare tactics' denounced

By Jane Bunce and David Crawshaw
November 06, 2006 12:00

Article from: AAP

SUPPORTERS of therapeutic cloning have used the first day of Senate debate on a Bill to overturn a ban on the technology to attack a "scare campaign" by its opponents.

Parliament is considering a private member's Bill from former health minister Kay Patterson that would allow researchers to clone human embryos to extract their stem cells.

Existing laws allow stem cells to be harvested from surplus IVF embryos, but prevent embryos being created through therapeutic cloning.

After seven hours' debate in Parliament today, the tally stood at 12 senators in favour of Senator Patterson's bill, and nine against.

The public debate has been marked by a series of headline-grabbing claims, many of which were repeated in the Senate today.

As one of Australia's foremost scientists defended the technology, Liberal senators Jeannie Ferris and Judith Troeth and Labor's Kate Lundy accused opponents of making sensationalist claims to scare politicians into voting it down.

"Much of this debate has been made up of scare scenarios which have been pushed to the absolute limit of science fiction to try and persuade those who are in favour of the Bill why they should not vote for it," Senator Troeth said.

"As an educated – presumably – member of Parliament, I resent that and I also think that many members of the public have been led astray in their thinking on this by somewhat wild statements."

Senator Troeth said the legislation expressly outlawed many experiments opponents of the Bill had highlighted, including human reproductive cloning and the development of human-animal hybrids.

Australian of the Year 2006, Professor Ian Frazer, today wrote to politicians to challenge attempts he said had been made to discredit the science behind therapeutic cloning and embryonic stem cell research.

He disputed claims that adult stem cells could be substituted for embryonic stem cells, that embryonic stem cells could not be used in human treatment because they caused tumours, and that there had not been sufficient advances in research to justify changes to the laws.

Professor Frazer said if a proposed moratorium on genetic engineering had gone ahead in the 1970s, he would never have developed a cervical cancer vaccine with the potential to prevent half a million deaths a year.

Scientists hope embryonic stem cell research will lead to medical breakthroughs for conditions such as spinal cord injury, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease.

Science had made "amazing" progress in eight years of research with human embryonic stem cells and Australian scientists should not be excluded from the next chapter, Senator Troeth said.

Labor senator Kate Lundy criticised opponents of the bill for ignoring the best interests of Australians and "evoking the fear of the unknown".

Liberal senator Jeannie Ferris labelled as "abhorrent" newspaper advertisements that "disgracefully claimed ... that there will be cloned foetus farming".

But NSW Labor senator and cancer survivor Steve Hutchins said thousands of eggs would be needed for research, and raised reports of eastern European women being rendered infertile through selling their eggs.

In the US, websites were selling eggs from beautiful women for thousands of dollars.

"We don't know what doors we will be opening if we pass this Bill," the former union official added.

Family First senator Steve Fielding said advocates of stem cell research had hoodwinked disease sufferers into believing the technology offered miracle cures.

Liberal senator Gary Humphries said the Bill would put scientists on a slippery slope to human cloning, as the embryos created would have the potential for independent human existence.

Supporters argue the Bill contains sufficient safeguards, including jail sentences of up to 15 years, to prevent scientists misusing the technology.

Nationals senator Barnaby Joyce predicted the Bill would be decided along the same lines as the conscience vote over abortion drug RU-486, which passed the Senate by 17 votes in February.

Prime Minister John Howard said he still had not made up his mind on the issue.

A vote on the Bill is due to take place by Friday. If passed, it will go to the House of Representatives.

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