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Senate debates stem cell bill

November 6, 2006 - 3:11PM

Debate on a private member's bill to overturn the ban on therapeutic cloning is underway in the Senate.

Thirty-six hours have been set aside this week for debate on the Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction and the Regulation of Human Embryo Research Amendment Bill 2006, a private member's bill tabled by Liberal senator Kay Patterson.

The Senate sitting period has been extended to accommodate the expected lengthy and passionate debate and a vote will be taken before it rises on Friday.

The first speaker, Labor senator Ruth Webber said it was incorrect to characterise the debate as a choice between science and morality.

She said senators and MPs were faced with an exciting opportunity to accept the challenge to help scientists remain world leaders in research.

"None of us know for certain where the research will lead us - but that is the nature of scientific research," she said.

Federal parliament voted in 2002 to ban human cloning and allow only spare embryos left over from IVF procedures to be used for stem cell research.

The new bill would give legislative effect to the recommendations of the expert Lockhart review's, which earlier this year said the laws should be changed to allow therapeutic cloning for stem cell research.

Australian Democrats senator Natasha Stott Despoja has laid out her reasons for supporting the bill in the second speech of a debate which could last 36 hours.

She says Australia is presented with an opportunity to benefit not only with the possible outcome of the research, which may lead to cures for debilitating diseases like Alzheimer's, but also from practicing with the technology.

"I am a strong supporter of this bill," Senator Stott Despoja told the chamber.

Australia, Senator Stott Despoja warned, may also lose its leading scientists if research restraints remained.

"What at stake is ... whether or not we want our research community to play the role that they're able to play."

Senator Gary Humphries (Lib, ACT) says the bill would put scientists on a slippery slope to human cloning.

"The clear ethical boundary we seek will be behind us, not in front of us (if we pass the bill)," Senator Humphries told the Senate.

Therapeutic cloning involves cloning human embryos and then destroying them as part of research

to potentially discover cures of diseases such as Alzheimer's.

"It is a human embryo," Senator Humphries said.

"It has real potential for independent human existence."

Senator Humphries sought to rebut earlier arguments from Natasha Stott Despoja (Dems, SA) and Ruth Webber (ALP, WA).

"It's been put that the scientific community overwhelmingly backs stem cell research ... but I dispute that those witnesses who oppose it can be painted as the lunatic fringe," Senator Humphries said.

A national stem cell bank should be set up to keep successful research in public hands, the Australian Greens say.

Greens senator Kerry Nettle today said Australia should follow the United Kingdom and establish a bank, in which all licensed researchers have to deposit viable stem-cells.

Researchers would be able to access the stem cells and in return would have to return their findings to the public domain.

Her call came as the Senate debated a private member's bill from Liberal senator Kay Patterson which would overturn a ban on harvesting human embryos to conduct stem cell research.

Senator Nettle foreshadowed moving an amendment calling for the bank to be established within two years.

"The Greens see the establishment of a national stemcell bank as a fundamentally important way of ensuring that embryonic stem cell research is well regulated, remains in the public domain and delivers public health benefits," she told parliament.

The establishment of a national stem cell bank was one of the key recommendations in the Lockhart report which had not been included in Senator Patterson's legislation, she said.

Senator Nettle unsuccessfully moved a similar amendment during the debate in 2002 over existing stem cell laws.

Liberal senator Judith Troeth accused opponents of embryonic stem cell research of using sensationalist scare tactics to try to torpedo the bill and hoodwink the public.

"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," she 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 bill did not permit human reproductive cloning, prohibited the implantation of an embryo created by any means other than fertilisation of an egg, and prohibited the development of human-animal hybrids.

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, she said.

Victorian Liberal senator Mitch Fifield said he would not support the bill because it allowed the creation of cloned human embryos that had the potential to become human beings, even if none would be allowed to reach that stage.

However, he did not oppose research using surplus stem cells left over from IVF procedures.

"I must confess to being troubled by the creation of an embryo specifically for experimentation and destruction rather than as a byproduct of a process designed to bring life," he said.

"My misgiving on this point is probably not enough, in itself, for me to vote against the bill."

Of greater concern to Senator Fifield was that the proposal was to create cloned human embryos.

"I understand and accept that no one is proposing that any of these new sorts of embryos be implanted into a woman," he said.

"I understand and accept that even if they were, they would be unlikely to thrive. But I cannot cross the line to create cloned human embryos that have the theoretical potential to become cloned human beings.

"I'm not convinced it's right to create human clones, even if they are only allowed to progress to embryonic stage.

"I cannot in good conscience vote for the bill in its current form."

Despite this, Senator Fifield hit out at opponents of the bill who had accused the legislation review committee of being stacked.

"I reject the view that the legislation review committee was ... stacked," he said.

"This claim reflects on the motives and the professionalism of the members of the Lockhart committee."

West Australian Liberal senator Judith Adams said the Lockhart review members were highly respected and she was disappointed some who opposed their recommendations had attacked them personally.

Embryonic stem cell research began just eight years ago, compared to the 50 years for adult stem cells, and the results already had been "nothing short of startling", she said.

Senator Adams, a member of the Senate review committee that backed Senator Patterson's bill, said all technologies brought the risk of misuse, but the National Health and Medical Research Council would make sure community standards were followed.

Penalties of up to 15 years' jail would apply if researchers abused the laws by placing cloned embryos into humans, she said.

Tasmanian Liberal Guy Barnett, a type one diabetic whose father died of motor neurone disease, said he did not support the creation of embryos purely for research.

Cloning of animals such as Dolly the sheep had not provided any beneficial medical treatments, he said.

"Dolly the sheep is now dead," Senator Barnett told parliament.

"Dolly was created using the same cloning techniques to be legalised under the cloning bill currently before the Senate.

"Animal cloning has delivered no safe health therapies. This week our federal parliament is being asked to take the gigantic ethical and scientific leap to allow the creation of a cloned human embryo for the purpose of it being destroyed ... in the pursuit of knowledge.

"The promises of cures from this new law are a false and at best flimsy hope that can only compound the misery of those with debilitating illness."

Senator Barnett said existing laws already permitted stem cell research with leftover IVF embryos, and the case had not been made to extend this to creating human embryos specifically for research.

NSW Labor senator Steve Hutchins said he had made his own journey through a difficult period of health.

"I am a cancer survivor," he said.

"I have seen the fragilities of life. I have spent time in palliative care wards and I have seen people who have come to the realisation that they are no longer going to live, that they are going to succumb.

"So I'm aware of the difficulties that some senators are having ... with this legislation."

Senator Hutchins said he would oppose the bill because advocates were relying on scientific evidence, some of it discredited, that supported their position while ignoring evidence to the contrary.

Even if it did lead to a medical breakthrough, the cure would not be readily available with only the rich and powerful getting access to it.

Moreover, with thousands of eggs being needed, women would be exploited.

Senator Hutchins said there were reports of eastern European women being rendered infertile through selling their eggs.

In the US, where women were paid for their eggs, there were websites offering eggs from beautiful women for thousands of dollars.

"We don't know what doors we will be opening if we pass this bill," Senator Hutchins said.

Senator Trish Crossin (ALP, NT) supported the bill and said the debate centred around the definition of an embryo.

"Those with different ethical beliefs and strong religious convictions will no doubt have a different definition than I have," she said.

"I understand that for some, an embryo is an embryo. But for me, a cell that is fertilised using somatic cell nuclear transfer is intrinsically different from one which is fertilised by sperm."

Existing sufferers of diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's knew embryonic stem cell research would not provide cures for them, but it might offer treatments in the years ahead, she said.

"They know that cures are probably decades away, maybe even half a century away," Senator Crossin said.

"But ... you have to be able to give scientists the key to start to unlock this door."

Senator Crossin said the legislation would not allow cloned embryonic stem cells to be implanted into a woman to create cloned humans, and the bill maintained a ban on selling human organs and tissues.

She was convinced there were sufficient safeguards, including jail sentences of up to 15 years, to prevent scientists misusing the technology.

Family First senator Steve Fielding said the scientific case for the bill had no legs and accused its advocates of peddling false hope.

"It is wrong to peddle false hope to some of the most vulnerable members of the community," Senator Fielding said.

He said the only source of the thousands and thousands of eggs needed for the proposed research was the ovaries of Australian women.

"The discredited South Korean research used 2,000 eggs for no result," he said.

Senator Fielding said taking eggs, through invasive procedures, would endanger women's health.

He said deals were now being made in Britain to extract eggs in return for all sorts of benefits.

This would also happen in Australia, he said.

Liberal senator Jeannie Ferris accused opponents of therapeutic cloning of allowing the debate to be hijacked by religious groups.

"Sadly some opponents of this view have allowed the debate to be largely taken over by interest groups and the religious, often generating more heat than light," she said.

"To suggest that supporters of this bill cannot be Christians is deeply offensive both to those who support and those who oppose this legislation.

"If we deny hope why do any medical research? For surely hope is to offer the chance to look forward with desire and reasonable confidence and it should never be denied."

Senator Ferris was also scathing of newspaper advertisements which appeared last week opposing any changes to the existing legislation.

"(The advertisement) disgracefully claimed last week that there will be cloned foetus farming is abhorrent. These baseless accusations against our scientists are of course easily answered."

Describing herself as an unashamed supporter of the bill senator Ferris said that Australians were ready to take the next step.

She said there were laws in place that would ensure there would be no abuse and she totally rejected claims that women would sell their eggs.

She said this suggested that women were driven by money and greed.

"(These) accusations are deeply offensive to women," Senator Ferris said.

Labor senator Kate Lundy also spoke in support of the legislation.

She criticised opponents of the bill of ignoring the best interests on Australians.

She accused them of "evoking the fear of the unknown."

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