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Split on stem cell decision

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THE federal government's decision to overturn the ban on therapeutic cloning is a "milestone in the democratic process", a leading stem cell scientist says.

Professor Alan Trounson, of Stem Cell Sciences at Monash University, said last night's vote in the House of Representatives was a "fantastic" result.

"It raises the spirits considerably," he said.

"It's a milestone in the democratic process that's enabled the will of the people to succeed here.

"It gives us the chance to see if we can do something for a very large number of appalling diseases for which there is not a lot of treatment currently available."

Scientists were particularly excited at the opportunity to contribute to the global scientific movement in therapeutic cloning, he said.

The government's green light opened the door to being able to study diseases in their earliest stages for the first time, which would lead to earlier diagnoses and treatment for sufferers, Prof Trounson said.

Study of adult stem cells would also lead to the development of new drugs, he said.

However, Australians for Ethical Stem Cell Research (AESCR) criticised MPs who spoke of the anguish of watching loved ones suffer from untreatable diseases as they debated the stemcell issue.

"Like superstitious peasants they believed the witchdoctors who held out hope of miracle cures from cloning," said AESCR national director Dr David van Gend.

"The credulity of these MPs was touching and pitiful - any disease suffered by any relative became reason enough for them to declare they 'would not stand in the way of a cure'.

"The moral damage to society has now been done by approving a laboratory subclass of human young, created only for exploitation."

Dr van Gend predicted that with the next review of the legislation in four years time, scientists would ask to create animal-human hybrids and to grow cloned embryos for longer to extract more mature tissues.

"This was a vote for hype and inhumanity - for an immoral and unnecessary science that will create new human lives solely for exploitation," he said.

Right to Life Australia (RTLA) spokeswoman Margaret Tighe lamented that MPs who previously supported the 2002 ban had been seduced into overturning it last night by "the siren songs of scientists".

"It's a very black day for Australia and the Australian parliament because they have in fact endorsed the creation of a class of human beings who can be used for the benefit of others," Ms Tighe said.

"The parliament has taken a gigantic step, leaping into an abyss of who knows what will follow."

Ms Tighe said she feared the 14-day limit for keeping embryos alive specified in the legislation would be extended little by little until it allowed "foetus farming".

RTLA also objects to the provision in the bill for harvesting the cells that grow into eggs from female aborted foetuses.

"I think that's absolutely horrendous," Ms Tighe said.

"It's really sick when you think about it, aborted female babies becoming mothers, so to speak, when they haven't even lived yet."

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