

Local

Stem cell centre signals stand against `chimera'

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MATP

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THE Australian Stem Cell Centre has distanced itself from a recommendation to legalise a controversial technique that merges animal eggs and human cells in a surprise move designed to clear the path to therapeutic cloning.

The opposition to so-called "chimera" was signalled in the ASCC's submission to the Senate's community affairs committee, which is collecting views on national embryo research and cloning laws. The ASCC position reflects that of the nation's chief scientist, Jim Peacock, who last month said chimera should not be allowed.

Critically, the ASCC stance may be a point of compromise in the heated debate about therapeutic cloning, also known as somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT).

Therapeutic cloning involves combining cells from an adult with an egg emptied of its nucleus, and then used to obtain versatile embryonic stem cells for research. Legalisation of SCNT is at the core of two separate bills expected to be introduced to the Senate this year.

ASCC head Stephen Livesey said public alarm about chimera -- first raised by Health Minister Tony Abbott -- had sidetracked discussion of therapeutic cloning. "We've got a major initiative (legalisation of SCNT) that needs to be debated," Dr Livesey said.

"We'd hate that discussion to be derailed by a controversial and scientifically minor issue."

According to Dr Livesey, therapeutic cloning could be developed without use of chimera. Proponents of cloning believe it may lead to greater understanding of and improved treatments for disabling conditions such as spinal cord injury and Parkinson's disease.

They claim too that Australia will lag behind countries such as the US, Britain and Singapore, which allow SCNT.

Opponents say it is morally wrong, as human life is created and destroyed. They add that adult stem cells can replace embryonic stem cells in the laboratory.

Among its 54 recommendations, the Lockhart review of embryo research and anti-cloning laws recommended that SCNT and chimera be permitted.

Both Senate bills -- one drafted by former health minister Kay Patterson, the other by Democrats senator Natasha Stott Despoja -- back Lockhart in its entirety.
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