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Stem cell go-ahead just days away

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CONTROVERSIAL laws allowing the creation of cloned embryos for stem cell research are expected to be passed by Federal Parliament as early as Thursday.

But conservative lobby groups opposed to the practice are gearing up for an eleventh-hour bid to defeat the bill, which passed in the Senate by only two votes.

The private member's bill will be introduced to the House of Representatives by West Australian Liberal MP Mal Washer, a medical doctor who has become a passionate advocate for stem cell research.

"I am expecting the bill to pass, but I do think the vote will be tight," Mr Washer said.

He said he had been greatly encouraged by the quality of the debate thus far, and he appreciated the difficult ethical issues involved for many MPs on both sides of politics.

MPs will be allowed a free vote on the issue. Prime Minister John Howard has yet to declare whether he will be supporting the bill, although he is expected to oppose it. Opposition Leader Kim Beazley has said he will be voting "yes".

Therapeutic cloning advocates have hailed the bill as a victory for science and hope, while opponents have warned it is the first step towards a brave new world in which life is created for functional purposes and then destroyed. The bill will not, however, grant scientists access to animal eggs for stem cell experiments, as recommended by the Lockhart review into the use of embryos for stem cell research.

Sydney's Catholic Archbishop, George Pell, has urged MPs to oppose the legislation.

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