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## Close vote brings cloning towards reality

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SCIENTISTS have been cleared to clone human embryos for research, but the Senate last night banned them from mixing human cells with animal eggs.

A last-minute compromise to appease critics complaining that therapeutic cloning would create human-animal hybrids delivered the agreement by a vote of 34 to 32.

The private member's bill put forward by former health minister Kay Patterson will now pass to the House of Representatives, where it is widely expected it will win approval and become law.

Senator Patterson's bill reflected recommendations produced last year by a government-appointed committee led by former judge John Lockhart that called for scientists to be allowed to inject genetic material from adult cells into human eggs stripped of their genetic material.

They would then grow the embryos for no more than 14 days and harvest the stem cells from the resulting embryos for use in research.

The Lockhart committee also proposed allowing the researchers to use eggs from rabbits and other animals instead of human eggs to prevent the need for invasive harvesting of human eggs.

As the debate neared a final vote last night it was clear the vote would be close between those who believed it crossed an unacceptable moral line by legitimising the creation and destruction of human beings and those who questioned whether an embryo was a human being and favoured the potential benefits the technique offered to medical research.

Democrats senator Andrew Bartlett, who had earlier described himself as undecided, shifted the debate with a proposal excising the animal egg recommendation.

The compromise won immediate support from Senator Patterson and other key supporters including Democrat Natasha Stott Despoja and Labor's Ruth Webber.

Senator Stott Despoja said the passage of the bill was the happiest moment of her parliamentary life.

"We avoided a Luddite moment, we have done the right thing and created the opportunity for great research to be undertaken," she said.

But there was dismay from critics of cloning.

Nationals Senate leader Ron Boswell said a race to clone a human being had been started on Melbourne Cup day.

"We gave sanction to distinguishing between two kinds of embryo - one born to live, the other created to die."

NSW Liberal senator Bill Heffernan said the debate was unfair and, after the ballot, yelled out to Senator Patterson and other supporters of the bill that they would now have something to write on their retirement plaques.

Family First leader Steve Fielding said he backed the search for cures for diseases

but could not tolerate cloning.

"We have crossed a line where we will be creating a human being with the intention of destroying it," he said.

Earlier the debate heard continuing claims that allowing cloning would produce science fiction-type outcomes involving human-animal hybrids.

Victorian Julian McGauran said the research would lead to a horrific future peopled with bizarre human-animal mongrels.

"It has all the pride equal to a Nuremberg rally - a rally of Dr Strangeloves chanting for such weird experiments as the creation of hybrid embryos, mixing humans with animals," he said.

But Senator Patterson said her bill contained strict limits on the research, including 15-year jail terms for anyone who attempted to implant a cloned cell into a woman's uterus.

"With the proposed legislation there is no threat of cloned people, Rabbit Man or slippery slopes," Senator Patterson said.

"Those who speak of hype are in fact themselves guilty of promulgating hype and hyperbole.

"Cloning of humans will continue to be strictly prohibited."

Senator Patterson challenged critics of cloning to consider that in 1798 Edward Jenner was ridiculed for using cowpox to create a vaccine for smallpox.

Critics had claimed that using the vaccine would cause people to grow horns and tails but the discovery had become "one of the greatest public health instruments of our time".

Ageing Minister Senator Santoro accused supporters of the bill of abandoning Christian values.

"The progress of this debate has seen not simply departure from our core beliefs and values, but an open contempt for the traditions which delivered them to us," Senator Santoro said.

"What is at stake here is humanity.

"It is a question of justice that should not be answered in terms of convenience."

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