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Vote on stem cells will echo abortion: Joyce

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THE conscience vote over the future of therapeutic cloning will be decided along the same lines as the debate over abortion drug RU-486 earlier this year, Nationals senator Barnaby Joyce says.

Parliament in February voted to strip Health Minister Tony Abbott of the power to approve the use of the drug, RU-486, passing control back to the Therapeutic Goods Administration. The bill passed the Senate by 17 votes.

"Unfortunately, I see it will be a vote that stands in proxy to the abortion debate," Senator Joyce told reporters in Canberra today.

"I ask for people to rid their mind of anything to do with the abortion debate and to see this vote in isolation.

"And after seeing all the facts to consider is it worthwhile ... to create and destroy life for the prospect that something may come about in 75 years time when we have the results on the board now."

Senator Joyce urged senators to consider that other non-controversial stem cell technologies that did not involve cloning, such as adult stem cells, already were showing results.

"Why are we going down this path of entertaining our curiosity for the sake of the major drug companies?" he asked.

"I say to my own colleagues: if you are conservative it means that you try to do no harm when there is a safer alternative."

Fellow Queensland Nationals senator Ron Boswell said Senator Alan Eggleston, a doctor, had written in a letter to senators that cures were 75 years away or more, and that science could advance under the present legislation.

Senator Eggleston's opinion cancelled out the pro-therapeutic cloning stance of West Australian Liberal MP Mal Washer, another doctor, Senator Boswell said.

Democrats Senator Andrew Bartlett urged senators to put work into their decision. "Exercising your conscience on issues like this shouldn't just be a matter of going to knee-jerk responses for or against," he said.

"I'm changing my mind a bit the more I read and I'll listen to the debate."

Tasmanian Senator Guy Barnett said the vote was "too close to call".

"Where there is life, there is hope," he said. "The science doesn't add up in support of cloning."