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A Vote for Stem Cell Research

By Constance Holden
ScienceNOW Daily News
 7 December 2006

Australian lawmakers this week defied Prime Minister John Howard and voted to allow researchers working with human embryonic stem (ES) cells to engage in the controversial practice of research cloning, otherwise known as somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT). The change, recommended last year by a committee appointed by Parliament, ends a 4-year ban on the procedure.

Stem cell researcher Alan Trounson at Monash University in Melbourne says scientists are "elated" by the 6 December vote in the lower House. The 82-to-62 margin of victory followed a 2-vote squeaker in the Senate last month. The new law, which will take effect in six months, is also bound to heighten enthusiasm for the annual meeting of the International Society for Stem Cell Research, to be held next June in Cairns, Australia.

Scientists all over the world are eager to try nuclear transfer, which they see as the most promising way to create populations of stem cells for study that genetically match patients with particular diseases. So far, no one has succeeded in creating such cell lines, and the procedure now appears to be considerably more difficult than it seemed when Korean scientist Woo Suk Hwang two years ago erroneously reported generating 11 cell lines ([ScienceNOW](#), 28 November). However, at least one group has made it to the first step--creating a human blastocyst by inserting the nucleus of an adult skin cell into an enucleated oocyte ([Science](#), 28 April, p. 516).

The embryos created by SCNT must be destroyed within 14 days. That should give researchers enough time to extract the inner cell mass of the blastocyst--the source of pluripotent cells, which are capable of turning into any kind of body cell. In a departure from the report's recommendations, the new law bans scientists from inserting human genetic material into animal eggs, an alternative for generating pluripotent cells that some U.K. scientists are planning.

"The morale of the Australian scientific community has been lifted dramatically" by the vote, says Australian Martin Pera, who now directs the stem cell center at the University of California, Los Angeles. Laws and regulations pertaining to nuclear transfer vary widely around the world. In Europe, only Belgium and the U.K. explicitly allow the procedure, while Germany and Italy, among others, explicitly ban it. In celebrating the win, some legislators took a swipe at U.S. stem cell policy, calling it a "blinker" approach that has "hamstrung" research.

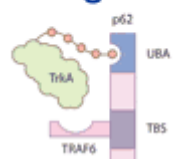
Newspaper reports quoted Howard as saying, "I think we live in an age where we have slid too far into relativism. ... There must be some absolutes in our society."

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