

Tuesday, 20 June 2006

VICTORIA CALLS ON COMMONWEALTH TO HONOUR STEM CELL DEBATE

Victorian Premier, Steve Bracks, today called on the Federal Government to ensure reforms to legislation covering stem cell research are discussed at the upcoming Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting next month.

Mr Bracks said it was disappointing the Federal Government appeared to be shelving this very important discussion.

“The Victorian Government believes we owe it to the late Judge John Lockhart, who oversaw the independent review into current legislation that restricts stem cell research in Australia in order to complete the work he did,” Mr Bracks said.

“After extensive consultation and public hearings with representations from community groups, state governments and the scientific community, the Lockhart Legislative Review Committee has recommended to the Commonwealth that Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer be allowed in Australia.

“This view is widely supported by the majority of state governments as well as the wider community which is why this must be discussed at COAG in July.

“There has an extensive process already in place over the past 18 months that must be followed to its conclusion.”

During a visit to the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute today, Mr Bracks said the Victorian Government maintained the current regulatory climate was holding back research into new treatments to tackle degenerative diseases, such as Parkinson’s and cystic fibrosis.

“Many countries already allow SCNT. If current restrictions are not eased we will also jeopardise Australia’s world-leading research and development status, which would see our brightest and best researchers leave our shores.

“If this matter is not resolved at COAG satisfactorily, the Victorian Government will explore further options and seek advice on whether there are aspects of stem cell related research that we can legislate at a state level.”

Innovation Minister, John Brumby, said Victoria had world leading research organisations and companies working across all areas of stem cell research, including adult and human embryonic stem cells.

“If SCNT is undertaken within a strict regulatory framework, it could also equip us with new drug discovery tools and insights into ways to model diseases so we can better understand how to fight them,” Mr Brumby said.

Mr Brumby said a recent study by Biotechnology Australia found there was considerable support in the wider community for stem cell research, with around 82 per cent of Australians believing stem cell technologies would improve their way of life in the future.

“Today we are faced with a similar choice faced by Australian society in the 1970s with the emergence of IVF technology,” he said.

“In 2006, IVF is an accepted part of our lives, and through this previous example we have demonstrated it’s possible to have an acceptable legislative framework to support the adoption of emerging scientific technologies.

“We need to keep Australia at the forefront of international research and to ensure everyone has access to new innovations in health care to improve all of our lives.”

The main recommendations in the Lockhart Committee’s final report to the Federal Government include:

- Amending legislation to allow SCNT;
- Establishing a stem cell bank (preferably at the Australian Stem Cell Centre in Melbourne) to assist Australian researchers with access to a centralised, reliable source of stem cell lines;
- Continuing a strict ban on human reproductive cloning.