

PM's retreat paves way for stem cell study

AUSTLN0020050325e13q0006e

Local

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MATP

500 Words

26 March 2005

The Australian

6 - NSW Country

3

English

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JOHN Howard has abandoned an attempt to extend restrictions on the scientific use of excess IVF embryos after failing to obtain state and territory agreement.

The decision means embryos created after April 5, 2002, may now be used in stem cell research.

The Prime Minister's push to extend for another year a three-year moratorium due to expire next month had raised fears among scientists that he may have been softening his previous solid support for embryo and stem cell research.

Mr Howard's office confirmed to The Weekend Australian yesterday that he would not proceed.

"The Prime Minister has decided not to proceed with an extension to the moratorium on the use of excess assisted reproductive technology embryos for research.

"This decision follows the establishment of a consistent national regulatory framework governing the use of excess embryos for research." Mr Howard could have pushed through an extension only by overriding state law -- a suggestion which divided Coalition ranks three years ago.

Opponents of the research range from Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson, Health Minister Tony Abbott, Justice Minister Chris Ellison and parliamentary secretary Chris Pyne within the Government, to church leaders including Catholic Cardinal George Pell.

The three-year moratorium was suggested by a parliamentary committee during a debate over the ethics of embryo research as a way of allowing more time for discussion on how it should be regulated.

Since then, the states have introduced uniform laws which include a ban on specifically creating embryos for research purposes.

Victorian Premier Steve Bracks welcomed Mr Howard's backflip.

"It's a significant step forward in the stem cell debate," said a spokesman for the Victorian Government.

Like NSW Premier Bob Carr and Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, Mr Bracks strongly backs human embryo and stem cell research and has joined with the other premiers in opposing the Prime Minister's attempt to extend the moratorium. The moratorium on the use of excess assisted reproductive technology (ART) embryos, hammered out in 2002 by the Council of Australian Governments, allowed research only on excess IVF embryos created before April 5, 2002.

Mr Howard wrote to all premiers and chief ministers in January requesting "out-of-session endorsement" of an amendment to the moratorium's "sunset date" but in a letter last week rescinded the request.

"It's another backflip, this time a welcome one, that highlights the lack of transparency and consultation regarding stem cell research," said Democrat senator Natasha Stott Despoja.

Mr Howard's move to extend the moratorium surprised some members of the Coalition, with leading embryo research advocate Mal Washer, a Western Australian backbencher and medical doctor, saying that he knew nothing of the push.

Dr Washer said there had been no discussion outside the cabinet of the upcoming review of the 2002 federal acts regulating the use of research involving human embryos and banning human cloning.

[AUS_T-20050326-6-003-128291]