

Stem Cell Research

This week the Senate is debating a bill introduced by former Health Minister, Sen. Kaye Patterson, which will pave the way for legal production of stem cells from human embryonic tissue. Such cells will then be available for use in medical research.

It is too early as of the time of writing this to predict how the vote will go (all parties are allowing their senators a conscience vote). It appears from polling, however, that there is a very large majority of Australians in favour of the bill. Similar legislation has been passed in Great Britain, and despite protracted battles in the USA, the current situation is that embryonic stem cell research is also legal there.

The arguments on both sides of the debate have been canvassed thoroughly, but still a number of politicians seem not to have made up their minds on the issue. Perhaps the fence-sitters genuinely have not bothered to think about it yet, or, more likely, they are trying not to offend any of their constituents, and so are remaining silent until the last minute.

Lobbying has been intense from both sides, with this year's Australian of the Year, Ian Frazer, weighing in most recently with an open letter to senators pointing out the potential benefits. On the other side have been the so-called Right-to-Life lobby and those who hold to the belief that a collection of half a dozen identical, undifferentiated cells with no organs, senses, consciousness or discernible features of any kind can be called a human being.

The argument most used by these superstitious folk is that adult stem cells can be used equally well. The problem with this is that adult stem cells are limited in both quantity and in the quality necessary for research purposes, and are much more difficult to extract. To create embryonic tissue and then discard what is left after stem cells have been extracted seems the most sensible way to go about things. After all, superfluous embryos after IVF procedures suffer the same fate, and without even having helped in the fight against disease. If the destruction of this embryonic matter is considered wrong, why aren't there placard-waving demonstrators outside IVF clinics?

Recent results have shown that diabetes, Parkinson's Disease, multiple sclerosis, cystic fibrosis and some debilitating heart diseases could possibly be treated in the relatively near future thanks to research based on stem cells. There are likely to be more medical breakthroughs, including those involving various types of cancer, some forms of blindness and a range of genetic conditions.

The argument that this procedure will lead to cloning of humans is far-fetched. There are enough legal safeguards in place to prevent this, and it is unlikely that the electorate will allow any changes to this situation. A whole raft of different ethical issues come into play with human cloning.

The Australian Senate has the opportunity to help pave the way for a great diminution of human suffering. It is to be hoped that they grasp this opportunity, but if they don't it will be incumbent on all of us to keep the pressure on until the clear will of the majority prevails and the health of future generations is no longer hostage to the superstitions of a few.