



## We must move ahead on stem cells

September 30, 2005

**To maintain its world-leading reputation, Australia needs to change the law to allow the therapeutic cloning of cells, writes Anna Lavelle.**

It was a welcome sight to see the lead story in yesterday's *Age* (29/9) on the Victorian Government's push to ease the stem cell laws.

First, because it's absolutely true that the present laws are hindering scientists and their potential to develop new treatments for disease.

Second, it was a relief to finally see some public discussion about the review headed by former Federal Court judge John Lockhart, QC, which will hear submissions in Melbourne today.

In June this year, the Federal Government announced the review of two pieces of complex and controversial legislation covering embryo research and the prohibition of cloning.

Since the announcement of the review, however, there has been little public discussion on the importance, even the existence, of the review panel or the impact the recommendations of the review will have on the future of Australian research.

Cardinal George Pell recently used a press club speech to call for a ban on all research involving the destruction of embryos or, as a secondary option, he said he would settle for no extension of the existing laws.

If he and those who support his position get their way - that is, if the present laws are either wound back or remain the same - the quality of Australian research and researchers will be adversely affected and the Australian public will pay dearly - socially and economically.

Without a competitive and progressive legislative environment, the arguments about the state of Australia's biotechnology industry and the search for appropriate sources of funding and capital will be the least of the industry's problems.

Under the Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2002, Australian scientists may, under strict regulations, use donated surplus IVF embryos to create embryonic stem cell lines for research purposes. Since the enactment of the legislation in 2002, there have been nine licences granted to access donated embryos.

It is the industry and research community's position that this legislation and regulation has worked well. It has allowed Australians to work with embryonic stem cells and stay at the cutting edge of this research.

It is now time - and again I applaud the Victorian Government's leadership on this - to amend and extend the two pieces of legislation to allow what has been referred to as therapeutic or non-reproductive cloning of cells but which is more appropriately described as somatic cell nuclear transfer.

SCNT can be used on a patient's own cells to create a source of individually tailored embryonic stem cells, which could theoretically grow organ tissue or be transplanted directly into a patient without being rejected.

What has excited scientists even more is the possibility that SCNT offers to "grow" specific diseases, for instance Parkinson's or diabetes, in the laboratory, allowing them to see how the disease actually develops, where to intervene and how to intervene.

This is where possible drug targets can be identified and this is where "big pharma" and the investment it brings to Australia and Australian research and development starts to seriously engage.

Under the present legislation, unlike researchers in South Korea, the United States, Britain, Singapore and Japan, Australian scientists are unable to develop this line of research. From being leaders in embryo and stem cell research, they are unable to even be followers because they can't import these types of stem cell lines from reputable international stem cell banks.

There is evidence that the Federal Government will adopt a "steady as she goes" approach,

keeping the existing legislation with little or no change. First, the review has been largely conducted with minimal public discussion. The last time stem cell legislation was in the news - when it was debated in Federal Parliament - there was protracted, and often heated, debate. This time, apart from Pell's comments, there has been scant discussion in open forums such as the general media.

The Government has already shown its hand on SCNT when, in April, Australia backed a United Nations call for a ban on SCNT for stem cell research.

Australia is seen to be an international leader in stem cell research. This month, *Forbes* magazine stated that "when it comes to listing stem cell start-ups and launching stem cell products, the surprising leader is Australia".

Without a change in the restrictive legislation this position will not be maintained. Australian researchers need progressive, flexible legislation, tight regulation and a well-articulated ethical framework that will allow them to use their expertise appropriately to develop treatments for diseases that cause real heartbreak. Investors require innovation and certainty.

If the panel recommends this option, and the Government accepts the recommendations, then it is likely that Australia will attract significant investment from overseas, not only in this field but in biotechnology in general.

If the panel chooses to leave the legislation as it is and the Government accepts those recommendations, the Australian public needs to understand the consequences. This requires an open, publicised and vigorous climate of debate. To date that has yet to happen.

Dr Anna Lavelle is CEO of AusBiotech, Australia's biotechnology industry organisation, which represents 2500 members, covering the human health, agricultural, medical device, environmental and industrial sectors in biotechnology.

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