

Stem Cell Research

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT SCIENCE AND RESEARCH

The Australian Democrats played a crucial role in the 2006 debate to update Australia's stem cell research and invitro-fertilisation (IVF) laws. The original 2002 legislation, permitting research on stem cells obtained from excess IVF embryos, was required by law to be reviewed by 19 December 2005. The Government formed a six member Legislation Review Committee, chaired by the late Hon John Lockhart AO QC, to investigate whether the 2002 legislation continued to be an appropriate legislative framework given developments in technology and community standards.

“The Democrats are proud to have brought the debate on stem cell research out into the open where it belongs”

**Senator Natasha Stott Despoja
Spokesperson
on Science and Research**

The Lockhart Review made 54 recommendations to the Government, some requiring legislative changes, others not. Principal among them was the call for legislation to be amended to allow the creation of embryos specifically for stem cell research – somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT), previously called 'therapeutic cloning'.

The Government rejected the findings of this report behind the closed doors of a Cabinet meeting and subsequently hired a consultant to produce a report to justify their decision. The Democrats campaigned to have this report brought into the open and for a conscience vote to be held on legislation encapsulating the Lockhart recommendations – both of which were ultimately agreed to by the Government.

The resulting parliamentary debate saw legislation pass that gives Australian scientists greater freedom to explore the therapeutic potential of embryonic stem cells while maintaining strict controls on how those cells can be created and used.

Our Action Plan

- Review National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines and Australian Customs regulations to ensure that the updated stem cell research legislation is fully implemented.
- Conduct triennial reviews of the legislation to ensure it continues to be appropriate for the community and the research sector.
- Commence negotiations with the Australian Stem Cell Centre regarding Commonwealth financial support beyond 2011.
- Continue to support research using both adult and embryonic stem cells.



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Issues

What are stem cells?

Stem cells are primal cells that have capacity to 'differentiate' into a range of other cells in the body – for example, heart cells, muscle cells, or nerve cells. The range of specific cells that stem cells can become at this stage depends on where the cells are sourced. Stem cells from adults or from umbilical cord blood can only differentiate into a few different types of cell, whereas stem cells from human embryos are able to differentiate into the vast majority, if not all, of the cell types in the human body.

The therapeutic potential of these cells is obvious but there are other benefits that will be more immediately available from this research other than the theoretical ability to use stem cells directly in therapy – which is still many years, even decades, away. For example, through the SCNT now allowed by the 2006 legislation, scientists can use embryonic stem cells to much more effectively study how particular diseases develop.

These are very early days for embryonic stem cell research and the Australian Democrats have consistently argued that it should not be a case of pursuing either adult stem cell research or embryonic stem cell research – that pursuing both simultaneously will offer the best opportunities for therapies based on these amazing cells.

Update on Legislation

The *Prohibition of Human Cloning for Reproduction and the Regulation of Human Embryo Research Amendment Act 2006* passed through both houses of Parliament in late 2006.

During this debate the Australian Democrats successfully amended the legislation to increase some of the maximum penalties for violating the laws relating to this research. This exemplifies the Democrats' commitment to encouraging stem cell research within the bounds of a strict regulatory regime.

New licensing regulations were adopted by the National Health and Medical Research Council on 12 June 2007, effectively ushering in the changes contained in the amended legislation.

Some state and territory governments have either already adjusted their own legislative frameworks to bring them into line with the new national legislation, or are in the process of doing so.

The Democrats support these developments and are not advocating any further relaxation in the stem cell research laws. Nevertheless, the Government's initial approach to this issue over-ruled balanced, independent advice in favour of a narrow, ideological opinion, and it did so behind closed doors with no explanation to the wider public. The Democrats will continue to fight against Government decisions that follow a similar pattern.



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