

Australian Prime Minister backs down on stem cell research

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In the face of growing opposition, Australian Prime Minister John Howard has been compelled to back away from plans to severely restrict medical research involving human stem cells and to salvage a last minute compromise with state premiers at a recent meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

Prior to the gathering, Minister for Aging Kevin Andrews, who had headed a parliamentary committee on the issue, had put a proposal to cabinet to ban any extension of stem cell research. The result would have impeded researchers by restricting investigation to the existing 10 stem cell lines—a move that would have forced many to consider working overseas.

Andrews' proposed guidelines flew in the face of the committee's recommendations and immediately provoked considerable outrage. A number of scientists expressed their hostility to the plan, pointing to the potential of the research to provide cures for serious degenerative diseases such as juvenile diabetes, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, and ultimately to develop replacements for diseased organs.

Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation chief scientific officer Dr Robert Goldstein attacked the proposed ban, saying "it removes a significant avenue of hope for people with the disease". Martin Pera, Associate Professor at the Monash Institute of Reproduction and Development, declared: "I think a total ban is absolutely unsupportable... the ethical considerations have been very well taken into account."

Anxious to defend the fledgling biotechnology industry, New South Wales Labor Party Premier Bob Carr called for a widening of the guidelines so that new stem cell lines could be obtained from excess embryos from in vitro fertilisation programs (IVF). He launched a public campaign to oppose the Andrews' plan and threatened to defy any federal ban by enacting separate state legislation. Faced with the prospect that top scientists would migrate

to NSW, other state premiers followed suit.

The COAG meeting on April 5 was set for a showdown between the prime minister and state premiers. But with criticisms mounting, Howard indicated he would not support Andrews and offered to allow the use of existing IVF embryos but with more stringent conditions than proposed by Carr. He insisted that scientists would have to obtain the permission of donors to use excess embryos for specific projects rather than a general consent proposed by Carr. He also called for a ban on the use of IVF embryos created after April 5.

At the COAG meeting, however, Howard was compelled to make further concessions. In the final compromise deal, the consent clause was loosened and, while a cutoff date was agreed to, it is subject to review by an ethics committee after 12 months, and again, after three years, by federal and state governments. The COAG plan has yet to be legislated in federal parliament where both the government and Labor opposition have declared they will allow MPs an individual "conscience vote".

Howard had calculated at the outset that there could be political mileage in taking a stance against stem cell research. He deliberately chose Andrews to chair the parliamentary committee into the issue, over former Health Minister Michael Wooldridge, a supporter of stem cell research. Andrews, a devout Catholic, is well known for his pursuit of the church's conservative social agenda. In 1996, he made his mark by leading the federal government's campaign to overturn Northern Territory legislation legalising euthanasia.

While there are legitimate concerns about the way in which stem cell research may be exploited within the profit system, these are not the objections of Andrews and the Catholic Church. Their opposition is rooted in deeply conservative social mores and religious superstition that is antithetical to science. Their claim that the extraction of stem cells from IVF embryos is tantamount to murder is

absurd from any scientific standpoint.

Stem cells are harvested at the very earliest stages of embryonic development, prior to the differentiation of cell types with particular functions—muscle, nerve, etc. Embryos are typically frozen for the IVF program at the pronuclear stage (one cell), or at any point up to and including the blastocyst stage (5-7 days after fertilisation)—a barely visible cluster of 30-150 cells.

The stem cells taken from such embryos have the ability to transform themselves into any type of cell, which is precisely why they are of interest to researchers. Scientists have learnt to reproduce stem cells indefinitely in laboratory cultures known as stem cell lines. Researchers are hoping to understand and therefore to control the ways in which stem cells develop into more specialised body cells. The new cells could then be used to replace diseased or damaged tissue.

In encouraging Andrews and pandering to the religious right, Howard was following the example of President Bush, who last year restricted federal funding for stem cell research in the United States. Although a less organised constituency than their American counterparts, the Catholic Church, various Christian fundamentalist organisations and their supporters still carry significant political clout in Australia. For Howard, the issue was another opportunity to curry favour with this rightwing milieu.

The cynical character of Howard's calculations is illustrated by the fact that while accommodating to the Catholic Church's reactionary nostrums on "the rights of the unborn child," his government is responsible for incarcerating hundreds of refugees, including children, indefinitely in prison camp conditions without any rights whatsoever. What is common to these apparently contradictory views is his appeal to the most conservative social forces.

Howard's plans, however, cut across the interests of big business that regard biotechnology research as a lucrative source of profits. While in its infancy, the industry is potentially worth billions of dollars. In the six months to the end of March, 44 of 62 companies listed in the Deloitte Biotech Index recorded a share price increase, with an average rise of 51 percent. The sector's biggest Australian company CSL has a market capitalisation of \$A6.54 billion.

Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* weighed into the debate last month, pointing out in an editorial that "millions of pounds of funding for research is now expected to flow to British universities in the wake of the Lords report

[liberalising stem cell research in the UK]. Australia, which has up to now been at the cutting edge of stem-cell technology, could easily be left behind. The stakes are just too high, not only for the scientific community, but also for all those suffering from diseases that stem-cell therapy has the potential to cure."

As pressure mounted from big business, the state premiers and within his own Liberal Party, Howard decided to cut his losses and reach a deal with the state premiers. But this compromise between the needs of the religious obscurantists and those of corporate profiteers still places significant barriers to an area of medical research that has enormous potential to alleviate human suffering.

Researchers will have to track down the donors of IVF embryos to obtain their consent. One IVF expert interviewed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation estimated that only seven percent of embryo owners would give the required permission. In addition, many embryos are unsuitable for research.

Scientists have also pointed out that the arbitrary ban on the use of IVF embryos created after April 5 could limit the potential genetic pool available to researchers. Treatments developed from a limited range of stem cell lines could result in tissue rejection or other complications.

The COAG decision also bans therapeutic cloning—the creation of stem cells from ordinary tissue. This technique holds out the possibility of creating tissue and ultimately even organs that could then be transplanted back into the donor. The new tissue's genetic makeup would be identical to that of the original, thus sidestepping the difficulties caused by tissue rejection.



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