Therapeutic cloning is redundant

Cory Bernardi

Therapeutic cloning is now unnecessary. In what has been called the "biological equivalent" of the Wright brothers' first aeroplane by scientist Dr Robert Lanza, two teams of scientists have created embryonic stem cells without using human eggs or embryos, called induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells.

This has profound implications for the future of stem-cell research worldwide and for our current legislation regarding therapeutic cloning. With this new approach, announced in scientific journals last November, the high aims of science and the sanctity of human life can coexist without the conflict that plagues therapeutic cloning.

I participated in the 2006 parliamentary debates regarding therapeutic cloning. We were told of the potential amazing medical benefits of embryonic stem cells and many of my colleagues were motivated to vote for cloning based on these promises. While the medical benefits of embryonic stem cell research would be years away, we were assured there was no other process that could achieve the desired results.

Science has now proved this to be untrue. So the question is now: How many embryonic humans are we prepared to create and destroy in the name of this unnecessary research? Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands. Maybe more. Each one a human life.

This new discovery offers that same promise of medical benefits, but there is no need to create those embryos and then sacrifice them. These new iPS cells offer just as much hope as embryonic stem cells obtained by therapeutic cloning, without painting a black mark on our ethics and humanity.

Last month, iPS cells were used to successfully treat sickle cell anaemia in mice, demonstrating that iPS cells have similar therapeutic potential to embryonic stem cells. So this is not just talk - there is scientific research to prove their therapeutic value.

This new discovery has rendered therapeutic cloning unnecessary. We need to focus our resources and efforts in advancing this new research and abandon therapeutic cloning.

This is an alternative that doesn’t involve the creation and sacrifice of human embryos and has the same potential as cloned embryonic cells. Should we not pursue this alternative to the full extent? The opportunity is here to further scientific progress without crossing ethical lines.

Such potential has led Dr Ian Wilmut, the scientist who cloned Dolly the sheep, to abandon work on cloning embryos to focus on developing iPS cells. We should do the same.

In February, the South Australian Parliament will be the first legislature to vote on therapeutic cloning since the public announcement of the discovery of iPS cells, which render therapeutic cloning unnecessary. Our state therefore has the unique opportunity to be the first to reject therapeutic cloning and promote iPS cell research in its legislation.

Maybe it is also time to reassess our federal legislation. The decisions made in 2006 are now based on old evidence. Now is the time to reconsider these laws. Now is the time to advance stem-cell research without destroying human embryos.

Now is the time to embrace a culture of life, advancing lifesaving research while at the same time saving early human lives.

Because, remember, we were all embryos once.

Cory Bernardi is a Liberal senator for South Australia.

THE ADVERTISER (Adelaide)
Date: 18/1/2008
Page: 20