



Speech by

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Hansard Wednesday, 10 October 2007

RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN EMBRYOS AND PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING AMENDMENT BILL

Dr FLEGG (Moggill—Lib) (5.00 pm): I rise to speak on the Research Involving Human Embryos and Prohibition of Human Cloning Amendment Bill. I do not want any part of the cloning of human life for the purpose of experimentation. I believe that there is an overwhelming principle here that we must have respect for human life and under no circumstances must human life become a tradeable commodity. I do not believe that we can say any science that leads to research is valid simply because it leads to some sort of discovery or research. You cannot have science completely divorced from humanity or ethics.

I have heard the argument here today that there may be an overriding law from Canberra that may supersede the decision that we make here today. I do not care how people voted in Canberra or in the other states. The reality is that this matter is before the Queensland parliament and we must make a decision based on the best judgement and based on the values and standards that each of us hold.

Let me make it clear at the beginning that my objection is to cloning or the creation of human life for the purposes of experimentation. I am not—I repeat—I am not objecting to stem cell research or embryonic stem cell research per se. It is not the whole of this bill and it is not the whole of this research that I have concerns about. We have heard here today mention of in-vitro fertilisation and organ transplant and other scientific advances. I see no moral dilemma with any of those things. I see a moral dilemma when human life is created for the purposes of experimentation.

I have listened to the arguments put in this place to date in this discussion, some of them put by people I have enormous respect for, particularly the member for Surfers Paradise, who made a very insightful and quite magnificent assessment of the issues that are involved here, and I think that goes to the root of the fact that this is a challenging issue for all of us and it should be done in an environment where we respect the views of others.

Clearly those who are in favour of this bill are motivated by a desire to seek to improve the lot and sufferings of humans with disease and that is a worthy thing. I am sure that many have expected with my medical background that this would also be my view, but I do take a different view and it is a view that I have long held. Decision making in these areas has to be underlined by your personal principles, beliefs, philosophy and values. I have a fundamental belief in respect for human life and whilst this would not be inconsistent with improving the treatment of people suffering with disease, I want to outline the reasons why I take the view that I do.

Firstly, it is yet to be established that it is necessary to clone human foetal material for the purpose of experimentation in order to achieve the objectives of advancing medical science. If these measures are not permitted, if this bill goes down here today, it is not the case that medical research will cease, it is not the case that we would not have tools available to advance genetic research for Parkinson's disease or therapy for spinal cord injuries. Whilst some scientists no doubt would like their research to head in this direction, their inability to do so would simply mean that research would utilise other currently available tools, in particular available stem cells. I do not believe the case has been made conclusively that such

research could not proceed without taking these measures that are before us today, measures some of us find to be ethically disturbing.

We live in a world where increasingly, and very sadly in my view, human life and human beings are sometimes treated as some sort of commodity that has a monetary value or is somehow tradeable. There are many precedents around that disturb me and others about the attitude towards human life. One image that I doubt many of us will forget is that of the battle of control of the child of Anna Nicole Smith that was conducted in the public spotlight with something akin to the behaviour of a football game. This child, who despite obvious monetary advantages, was born with significant disadvantage and was used as a public brawl. Few could escape the conclusion that it was associated with a monetary windfall for whoever could prove paternity. The image of someone cheering as a victor because paternity had been established was, in my view, symptomatic of the decline of our ethical concerns. This should have been about a baby and its welfare; it became about celebrity and wealth.

Science, and medical science in particular, has achieved many marvellous things that have been greatly to the advantage of our fellow citizens. But with the advance in genetic technology, as with other scientific discoveries, comes the potential for misuse. The genetic work that has been done to date, which has produced a lot of benefits and which I welcome, has still been used at times in ways that view convenience and lifestyle factors as more important than human life. We have seen people who use technology to produce designer babies, to pick and choose or selectively breed features that they want in a child—everything, in fact, from the complexion to musical skill or sporting prowess or gender. This is another example of what I consider to be turning human life into a commodity instead of valuing and celebrating each individual whether they be attractive, talented, wealthy or disabled and battling. There is somehow implicit in this trend a concept that people with certain attributes are superior or more valuable than those who do not possess those attributes.

A reproductive technology such as villus biopsy to identify the chromosomes in the very early stage of pregnancy is used in order to screen for genetic abnormalities. This technology has produced enormous benefits to many patients, including patients of my own in the past. But again it is technology that can have a downside. It can be misused. We have seen that technology used in parts of the world where early detection for gender of a pregnancy can be used to terminate pregnancies if the gender is not what the parents are seeking—again an example of our declining standard of valuing each individual human life. As a father of four boys, I know when someone sees a family with four children of the one gender people usually jump to conclusions. ‘Looking for a girl, were we?’, is the line I usually get. But I cannot imagine rejecting a child because it was not the gender I was looking for.

It is only about four years ago that a bill was brought to this House to allow the use of foetal stem cells from surplus human embryos from the fertility industry. The assurance was given at that time that this would not be the thin end of the wedge, that we would not be moving towards cloning of humans or taking further steps down the line of turning human life into a commodity. In fact, the bill was called the prohibition of cloning bill, which the government is seeking to amend here today.

There are alleged safeguards contained in this present bill that state it would become a criminal offence to assist with the cloned human life beyond 14 days, implanted in a female uterus and so forth, and after this time it must be destroyed. However, there is no guarantee that we will not be back here in another four years wanting to further expand these provisions. Even if these provisions are adhered to in this state, clearly the technologies that emerge within the scope permitted by this bill can then be taken to other jurisdictions and advanced further. The world is such that the demand for this sort of technology will ensure that it is taken from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. It is a little bit like banning pornography or extreme violent combat sports only to find them popping up on cable television because they are being conducted in another jurisdiction.

One Queensland print media incorrectly quoted me as saying that I felt the benefits of embryonic stem cells for research were overstated, when in fact I was making reference to the benefits from cloning to obtain embryonic stem cells. There is a major difference. It should be understood that adult stem cells have led to numerous valuable human therapies. Embryonic stem cells are yet to produce any applicable therapies that are practical to patients. Further, technology does not even currently exist to prepare the embryonic stem cells from cloned embryos. I have no objection to the study of embryonic stem cells, and I would like to make that clear. I have no objection to research using embryonic stem cells where they have been sourced from embryos that were not specifically created for the purpose of experimentation. But we hear these grandiose claims being made for these wonderful advances. It is time for a reality check. There is no evidence that cloning embryos for research will produce anything remotely like the medical advances that people are suggesting—no evidence whatsoever. There is also currently no technology for the cloning.

I have had contact over the years with academics and researchers. I understand their enthusiasm to pursue their research and I understand their arguments about not interfering in scientific endeavour. I think this is an argument and a debate that our community should nevertheless have and that should reflect the

values of individuals and of our community. I am not pleased to hear the community misled with promises of incredible advances for which at the time we are having this debate in this parliament there is absolutely no evidence to support. There are ample areas available to research using adult stem cells and currently available embryonic stem cells, and it is likely from a Queensland point of view that we will contribute more to the knowledge of science and medicine by becoming leaders in some areas of research rather than having an open season in numerous areas of research.

I think it is important in this debate to make it clear that it is frequently confusing to people to understand. We have done enormously valuable research with adult stem cells, yet embryonic stem cells have significant technical problems that have rendered them to date ineffective as a source of new disease treatments for humans. Further, stem cells obtained from cloned humans at this point in time while we have this debate in the Queensland parliament is science fiction. No-one has yet mastered the technology for human embryonic cloning and there is no evidence, having done so, that there will be huge rewards for patients. Over many years I have seen false hopes raised in hundreds of patients. Every time you turn on a media outlet there is a new cure coming, until you read the fine print and find it is just someone's unproven research project. I have seen everything—the downright fraudulent, the deceptive, particularly in unfulfilled promises to cancer patients, through to the more plausible and conventional therapies that can still be used to unreasonably elevate people's expectations and produce false hope. I think that this is happening in this debate.

I hear that there are potential benefits and treatments to come from this research, and yet on closer inspection there is no evidence that this is the case and some strong evidence that more conventional genetic research with adult stem cells and conventional surplus embryonic stem cells probably offer much greater promise. I have spent an entire working life, some 25 years, treating patients with almost every disease you could imagine. These are people that I care deeply for and in many cases they have been friends. I have seen a number of members of my own family die from the effects of Alzheimer's disease, including my mother who contracted the disease in her 50s. I have seen members of my family die from cancer, including my father. I have seen a family member born in my family with Down syndrome. It would be wrong to assume that those of us opposed to cloning of human life are in some way uncaring or seek in some way to prevent cures for these sorts of diseases becoming available. Research and discovery will continue with the tools that are available, as it has done for years now, and the prospects for medical breakthroughs will continue to shine bright without pushing the boundaries of respect for human life in the manner envisaged in this bill. We heard the enormous promise of embryonic stem cells four years ago. Whilst, had I been in this parliament at that time, I would have supported that bill, no medical treatment advances have yet flowed from that. Yet once again we are here debating this issue.

I read, and I will table shortly for the benefit of the House, an article in the magazine *Sydney Alumni* from the University of Sydney, which happens to be my old university—hardly an institution that is opposed to medical research. In its current edition in the section that discusses research it quotes a whole range of people from Sydney university and from other universities in relation to this particular issue. I might read a couple of those quotes, because an important message that I would like everyone to take home, whether they support the position I am taking or not, is that we, and in particular the community, should understand the danger of overhyping and raising people's hopes falsely in relation to these matters.

One researcher from Monash University says in this article, 'The overselling is a strategy to overcome obstacles in obtaining funding for your particular area of research.' Professor Andrew Elefanty of the Embryonic Stem Cell Differentiation Laboratory at Monash University—not an opponent of embryonic stem cells but a researcher into not adult stem cells but embryonic stem cells—says in the article, 'It is important the general public realises that encouraging results from laboratory research or early clinical trials would not necessarily translate into new treatments with widespread application.' He goes on at some length and says, 'So people have to be aware that just because you do something in a research setting doesn't mean it is going to be feasible or safe enough to bring into clinical use.'

I will table that article in case somebody following this debate has some interest in it. It is a difficult debate for us. I appreciate from the speakers I have heard—and I look forward to those to come—that people have searched in their own mind for their own standards and principles on which to make a decision. I have also done that. I believe passionately in medicine and in science, in caring for people and in helping people, but I have to weigh that up against the fact that I believe human life should be respected and never allowed to become a commodity that is somehow tradeable.

Tabled paper: Copy of an article by Melissa Sweet titled 'Beware the stem cell hard sell'.

I am particularly concerned about exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims about what benefits would come. If you wanted an analogy outside the biological area, we could perhaps use the nuclear one. There are enormous peaceful benefits from nuclear power but there are enormous downsides. I do not think anyone in this chamber would want to say that anything is fair game in nuclear research or putting the results of nuclear research into effect. I think all of us would want to apply some principles and some judgement to that sort of science. The same is involved in the cloning of human beings. Although there are

safeguards in this bill, there is nothing that will stop technology developed in Queensland being advanced in other areas that do not apply this law. There are those in the world, sadly and tragically, who would misuse this sort of technology. As well as the upside and the benefits people may perceive in it, there is no doubt a darker side exists and there is the potential for misuse.