



Speech by

## Karen Struthers

MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

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### RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN EMBRYOS AND PROHIBITION OF HUMAN CLONING AMENDMENT BILL

**Ms STRUTHERS** (Algeria—ALP) (5.18 pm): Last week I met a group of courageous and determined people, all survivors of stroke, who urged me to support the passage of this bill. They welcomed my reply that I was supporting the bill.

I had just launched an art exhibition for the Stroke Association of Queensland—a non-government association based in my local electorate. The creative works of stroke survivors were being showcased at this exhibition. A man with aphasia, and a great name, Winston Jerome Lindsley hooked up a gadget that assisted him to speak. Totally unprompted he raised the topic of embryonic stem cell research. I was flattered to hear his words to me, 'Please help us by supporting embryonic stem cell research. This research may lead to treatments for stroke and aphasia. Please support the bill.'

This then sparked a discussion amongst the group, all of whom were fervent in their support for the bill. They knew about it. They knew we were debating it some time in the next few weeks. They acknowledged however that research on treatments was going to be a long, slow process. Ann Mellersh, a stroke sufferer herself and president of the Stroke Association of Queensland, quipped in a light-hearted and non-offensive way, 'You'd better lock the Catholics in the toilet though when the vote is on—they won't support the bill.' I am sure she will not mind me dobbing her in for saying that. She was concerned that religious beliefs would override other views. It is great to see the very thoughtful way and the very well-researched way members in this House have been contributing to this debate today.

The practices to be given the green light in the bill mirror those already passed in the federal parliament. The debate in the federal parliament then like now has raised moral and ethical issues about the sanctity and quality of life. Essentially the bill raises such questions as: can the collection of cells from which embryonic stem cells are harvested and hybrid embryos created be considered a human life and what value is to be attributed to this stage or type of human life, however one wants to consider this?

At one end of the continuum are those who believe that life has sanctity or is sacred regardless of the degree or kind of suffering, deterioration, dependency and regardless of the imminence of death, the burden on others and the wishes of the subject to live or die. Lives have sanctity, regardless of the quality, condition or circumstances of that life and regardless of the biological stages of that life. That is one position which some people hold.

I am not shy in admitting that I am more in the quality of life camp. That is the view that life is contingent on circumstances such as the imminence of death, the constancy and severity of pain, the ability to think clearly and rationally, to enjoy life, to have dignity, to make rational choices and the level of dependency on others. These issues all impact on the quality and value of life and the choices people make in their lives. The more extreme sanctity position values life independently of its quality or condition. Where there is bioelectrical activity life is to be protected.

A critical issue for me in thinking about this bill is: at what stage in development does a living organism take on a quality of life that must be nurtured and protected—a quality of life when emotion, feeling, intelligence and other fundamental human qualities emerge? This is difficult to define, but I am satisfied that to ensure cloning techniques are used for research purposes only it will be an offence to allow an embryo to develop for more than 14 days. This is when the rudimentary nervous system, the primitive streak, first appears.

I am also of the view that on balance the potential for new treatments and improved quality of life for children and adults outweighs concern about the protection of an embryo at such an early stage. Many people in my local community who are suffering or caring for people who are suffering with diseases that have destroyed them physically and destroyed their dignity and soul may benefit from these developments in the future. Those people, including those at the Stroke Association, have certainly expressed clearly to me that they want to live with some hope. The member for Moggill spoke of false hope. Many of the people I have spoken to are aware of the long-term nature of this type of research.

I am also satisfied that numerous safeguards have been built solidly into this bill to ensure that researchers do not breach ethical standards. In fact, the strict licensing arrangements in the bill and the existing robust research frameworks governing universities and other institutions in Australia and Queensland provide significant safeguards. In this bill unacceptable activities remain prohibited, with maximum penalties of up to 15 years imprisonment for noncompliance. Those prohibited activities include cloning a human for reproductive purposes, making heritable alterations to a human embryo and creating or developing a chimeric embryo. It will also be an offence to permit an embryo created for research to be implanted into the body of a human or an animal under any circumstances. These offences carry maximum penalties of up to 15 years imprisonment for noncompliance.

This bill will allow important and groundbreaking research to be conducted in order to obtain a better understanding of disease and how cells differentiate. This may ultimately have a profound and positive effect on the ability to treat a range of human conditions and diseases such as spinal injuries, heart failure, Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis and stroke.

I have been impressed with the work of Queensland based researchers in this field. As a member of the Griffith University Council, I am probably a bit biased but I cannot help but boast about the adult stem cell breakthroughs that Dr Alan Mackay-Sim and his team are achieving through their work at Griffith University in conjunction with researchers at the PA hospital. I can understand the wishes of my 'strokee' friends. They are aware of the outstanding, innovative research of researchers like Dr Alan Mackay-Sim and clinicians at the PA who are involved in cell transplantation therapy. This involves removing cells from paraplegics and transplanting them into their own spinal cords. They are aware of the possibilities in stimulating adult stem cells in the brain to repair the brain after a stroke or Parkinson's.

In Australia, Professor Mal Hone is working on neural stem cell research with encouraging developments. Worldwide there are many others. There have been published reports on stroke specific research from people like Saritz in 2003, Nan et al in 2005 and Peterson in 2004. It is my understanding that they are all using embryonic stem cells. Their research is resulting in some positive functional improvements through the work that they are doing.

Do I give false hope? What I have seen with people who have spoken to me is more that they are very aware that this research takes a lot of time. They see it sensibly as opportunities opening up. They know that some of these doors will close. In the presentations to me by people who have had their lives turned upside down by some sort of physical illness, they see that these opportunities for research push the boundaries but rightly so. They say they need to in order to make further advances.

As long as there are safeguards, which I am satisfied there are in this bill, then this sort of research ought to be encouraged. Certainly in Queensland we have some very prominent researchers doing some outstanding work. The bill will ensure that further advances in the field of science are made within a very responsible and robust regulatory framework.

One of my son Alexander's favourite books is *Edwina the Emu*. I do not want to make light of what is a very serious issue, but in this story—and I have to read it probably two or three times a day—Edwina lays 10 emu eggs. I think they are green. She goes to great lengths to get a job to support her future family. She cleans chimneys. I think she works on a bus. She works in a bar. She is in a cafe when she overhears a man who is eating his bacon and eggs say that he eats emu eggs. She drops what she is doing in the cafe and runs home to protect the emu eggs. I guess I am potentially making light of a very serious issue here. Each time I read that I understand Edwina's deep-rooted motherly protective instincts. There is no-one in this House who does not value human life. But there is a range of considerations related to this bill that members have canvassed in this House that take us beyond simply a sanctity of life position for the sake of sanctity of life. There is a range of other issues.

In reading *Edwina the Emu* I also understand, thinking about this bill, the desperation many parents and loved ones feel in exploring and wanting every possible treatment option for their sick family members or their sick children. To me that is the broader issue here. It is an issue about the broader quality of life for individuals, not simply the sanctity of life for an individual entity.

In relation to this bill I guess I have come to understand after much deliberation that the sanctity of life position in its extreme is constantly under challenge as new technological and medical advances occur. It has to be challenged. Community members are demanding more sophisticated treatments for all sorts of diseases. That requires more sophisticated research. It requires more sophisticated consideration by all of us as community members and us as leaders in our elected roles of all of these issues and new developments.

In order to make rational and fair beginning and end of life decisions, the quality of life for individuals and the quality of life for all as distinct from simply sanctity of life must be given full consideration. Again I commend the way in which members have dealt with the issues in this bill. It has been a very thoughtful debate so far and will continue to be. I commend the bill to the House.