

3/10/2006

The Chair  
Community Affairs Committee  
Australian Senate  
Parliament House  
Canberra

Dear Senator

The current debate on embryonic cloning for the extraction of stem cells is one we shouldn't be having. It is premature.

Over many years we have established progressive methods of testing new drugs, vaccines, procedures, etc. This is no accident. It is necessary to prove as far as possible that a new discovery is reasonably effective and safe before it is applied to human beings. It is also important not to generate too much false hope. Such testing is sequential and may involve test tubes and petri dishes and a range of animals.

We are told that stem cells might cure diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, spinal injuries, organ failure. The list seems endless. Our experience with medical science should teach us at least two things. Firstly, many things that we wouldn't have believed possible can be accomplished and secondly, we should proceed by the well established route, briefly outlined above, because we have had disasters in the past and no doubt have avoided other disasters through proper testing. Have we any evidence that we are ready for human testing? So far the Media has not shown us one animal that has had its spinal injury reversed; one mouse that has had its diabetes cured or one rabbit in which brain cells have been caused to grow in the correct place. If stem cells can be made to grow into basal ganglia cells and thereby cure Parkinson's disease, or into any other tissue it will be necessary to demonstrate that growth can be turned off at the appropriate moment or the cure could prove to be as bad as the disease. We have been shown no evidence of any of this.

Surely it would be safer to follow the established protocols and demonstrate that these things can be achieved in animals before they are tried on suffering human beings. Kay Patterson, one of the drafters of the Bill to be debated, has herself been quoted as saying that it will take 20 years for the value of this research to be known. Why have these divisive debates now? Would it not be better to follow the established rules and have the scientists come back and show what can be achieved, without harm, in animals before embarking on human studies? If the system is short circuited and disasters occur in humans who will accept responsibility. If function can be restored in animals the debate will still be difficult; if not there will be no need for moral judgements.

John Glancy