

Media release
5 April 2004

More human embryos at risk of destruction for research.

“The lifting of a partial ban on embryo research places even more human embryos at risk of exploitation and destruction,” says the Executive Officer for the Life Office of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, Dr Brigid Vout.

Previously, only ‘excess’ IVF embryos created before 5 April 2002 could be used in research. From today, human embryos created after this date are also at risk.

The Life Office is concerned that a sunset clause permitting the use of these embryos has been allowed to come into effect, without an up-to-date look at the scientific facts or ethical issues.

“The Federal and State governments have failed in their responsibility to ensure that legislation about destructive embryo research is in line with scientific developments and community ethical standards,” Dr Vout says.

An independent review of the operation of the Research Involving Human Embryos Act should have begun as soon as possible after the 19th of December 2004. Instead it has been delayed and is not expected to report until months after the sunset clause comes into effect. It will be very difficult to then “turn back the clock.”

Dr Vout says “Important scientific evidence has emerged since the Research involving Human Embryos Act was passed in 2002, casting further doubts on the therapeutic potential of embryonic stem cells.”

“Three years on, and research and therapy involving human embryonic stem cells is yet to help a single patient.”

“Meanwhile, stem cells from children and adults, or the cord blood and placenta of newborn babies, continues to control or cure disease. These ‘adult stem cells’ can be extracted without harming anyone.”

Adult stem cells are already being successfully used to treat heart attacks, Parkinson’s disease, leukaemia, paraplegia and many other serious conditions. They can be used without the problems of immune rejection or tumours associated with embryonic stem cells.

Two weeks ago, Professor Alan Mackay-Sim and his team at Griffith University published the results of research which shows that stem cells from the human nose are able to give rise to supplies of new brain, liver, heart, kidney and muscle cells.

“We do not need to kill embryos to obtain life-saving stem cells. That research direction is not only unethical, but scientifically out-of-date,” says Dr Vout.

The Life Office calls for the review of the Research Involving Human Embryo Act and the Prohibition of Human Cloning Act to commence and report without further delay, and for the NHMRC Committee which licences the use of abandoned human embryos to maintain the moratorium in the meantime.

Australian legislation should be amended to reflect the fact that the destruction of human embryos for research is unethical and unnecessary.

“Australia continues to destroy human life and erode respect for human dignity for the sake of unpromising research and bad science. We should be seeking adult stem cell therapies which respect human dignity and restore health to the sick and injured.”

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