

The appeal from members of the public and community groups for a ban on the scientific research involving the use and manipulation of human DNA or human cells and the application of that technology to clone human embryos has been coupled with a call for complementary State and Federal legislation to this end. However, amidst the widespread public concern about the ethics of cloning human beings, there is cautious acceptance for the therapeutic benefits of this technology to treat diseases, but not if that involves either the creation or the destruction of human embryos.

The Catholic Women's League Australia, Bioethics Working Party, stated its firm opposition to both the direct cloning of human beings and to human parts, "except in a limited use in the latter when human embryos are not used of and disposed in any form whatsoever..."

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists said they support legislation or regulation prohibiting human reproductive cloning, but that "ongoing debate in this rapidly changing field of research must continue".

The Country Women's Association of New South Wales stated that in forming their opinion they gave a great deal of time to study published articles on human cloning. They concluded that "some form of legislation and control is necessary"; that a total ban should be placed on the cloning of a whole human individual but that

"a distinction should be drawn between the cloning of a whole human individual and the copying of the component parts of a human, such as DNA and cells."

St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney reminded the Committee that there has been further developments in the potential for human applications of cloning technology since the AHEC report was published. The submission also pointed out that: "It is a field in which even the basic assumptions are being questioned and new possibilities are being conceived of very quickly."

The public forums planned by the Committee will provide the opportunity for diverse groups to come together to elaborate, explain and contest the array of views.

Current status

In the meantime, submissions continue to arrive and Committee members are informing themselves of the issues. The Chair of the Committee, Mr Kevin Andrews has raised relevant questions during discussions in the United States with Dr Eric Meslin, Executive Director of the National Bioethics Advisory Commission. Mr Andrews also has held discussions in London with Baroness O'Neill, Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge and acting Chair of the Human Genetics Advisory Commission and Dr Suzanne McCarthy Chief Executive of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority.

Government responds to ship safety recommendations

The Government has accepted many of the recommendations contained in a report on ship safety. The report, entitled *Ship Safe - An inquiry into the Australian Maritime Safety Authority Annual Report 1996-1997*, included 14 recommendations to which the Government responded on 31 August 1999. The Government response was debated in Parliament on 30 September 1999.

In the inquiry members of the then House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and Microeconomic Reform were struck by the challenge of developing and maintaining a culture of safety, rather than prescribing more rules that may be evaded by a few unscrupulous players.

The report was the fourth in a series of inquiries into ship safety. People well remember in the early nineties the dramatic break up of some of the 'rust buckets'. In 1992 this sparked the first of a series of Ships of Shame reports. These reports led to safer shipping internationally and nationally.

Last year the committee found significant developments in ship safety had occurred since the previous parliamentary inquiries. However, members reported how disturbed they were by the extent and severity of breaches in crew welfare, especially for foreign

seafarers. In the recent debate in Parliament members expressed their regret that the Government did not accept recommendation 14, namely that the Commonwealth:

- provide interim financial assistance on an annual basis for approved seafarers' welfare organisations; and
- investigate the establishment and annual funding of a National Seafarers' Welfare Network, and report the finding to Parliament by June 1999.

Committee Chair, Mr Paul Neville MP believes 'that much can be achieved with only modest assistance from government'. He hopes the Government will reconsider its position on providing interim contributions to approved seafarers' welfare organisations.

Members believe seafarers' advocates, such as Stella Maris and Missions to Seamen, serve a vital role in caring and protecting very vulnerable workers who are far from home for a very long time, often working in appalling conditions. They can lack the most basic need - that of human contact. Sometimes the solution may be as simple as access to a postal service or phone.

In parliament Mr Neville said that 'the abuse and neglect of seafarers constitutes a violation of human rights and is a serious risk to ship safety'. He believes 'no country can escape responsibility'. Mr Neville said that 'if we are not guilty by complicity then we are guilty by default if we do nothing.'

Further information: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/cta or Meg Crooks, committee secretary, (02) 6277 4600.