

Science friction!

Participants at public forums on human cloning have questioned the legality of cloning research being undertaken by Australian research institutions.

The public forums, held in Melbourne and Canberra in March, were organised by the House of Representatives Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee as part of its investigation of human cloning. The forums included scientists conducting cloning research, community groups concerned about the implications of that research, ethicists, church representatives and a youth group keen to ensure that the voice of youth is heard.

Some people at the forums suggested that attempts to draw a distinction between cloning for therapeutic purposes and cloning for reproductive purposes simply confuses the issue. According to Catholic Church representatives, it is a "bogus" argument based on a "distinction without a difference". However most scientists indicated that they supported the international consensus that a distinction should be drawn between cloning an individual human being and the cloning of human tissue or organs.

'defining when life begins is fundamental'

It was suggested that defining when life actually begins is fundamental to the discussion of research involving human embryos. This type of research is being undertaken currently in Australia and has been criticised by a range of ethicists and church leaders alike, particularly if the embryo is destroyed in the process.

According to one scientist, church doctrine indicates that life begins when the sperm meets the egg. On that basis, the House Legal Committee was told that therapeutic cloning falls into a

different category from reproductive cloning because no sperm meets an egg. In response, church representatives argued that a new entity is born when the genetic material to produce the new being or organ comes together and begins to reproduce.

Commenting on the differences in view on the cloning issue, Anglican Church representatives said that, in a pluralist society, ethical principles need to be articulated very clearly to ensure that they take into account the differences in values and beliefs.

Apart from discussing these ethical and scientific issues, the public forums also addressed legal aspects of cloning. Debate focused on the need for uniform national laws and a federal regulatory structure, with some people expressing concern that restrictive laws could drive cloning research underground or offshore.

To get the whole picture, the House Legal Committee inspected laboratories at the Monash Institute, where cell research is being conducted. According to scientists at the Institute, cell research can be used in researching human disorders, including birth defects, and in tissue regeneration, drug discovery and tissue development for transplantation.

The House Legal Committee will draw on the information it received during the two public forums on human cloning and the inspection when it further explores the scientific, ethical and regulatory aspects of human cloning. The transcripts from the public forums are available on the Committee's web site at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/laca or from the Committee secretariat, telephone (02) 6277 2358 or email: laca.reps@aph.gov.au



The House Legal Committee's public forum on human cloning, at which members of the public were able to ask questions of participants, Parliament House, Canberra.