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Sanctity-of-life argument doesn't often extend to soldiers

Ben McNeil

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POLITICIANS who champion the moral high ground over sanctity of life can hardly oppose the use of human embryos for research yet also condone our involvement in the war in Iraq.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, agreed last week to allow a conscience vote over laws governing stem cell research. In doing so, it gives us an opportunity to acutely observe the moral consistency of each Member of Parliament.

Opponents often call the use of embryos for research as a desecration of human life, never to be allowed. Supporters, however, highlight that investing in stem cell research will ultimately save countless premature deaths through potential treatments of diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, diabetes or spinal-cord injuries.

To avert the reign of terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, those in favour of the war in Iraq argued that the human sacrifice of soldiers was a worthy and necessary initial cost to save many more lives in the future.

Surely the same sacrifice principle is central to the debate over stem cell research? Last month, US President George W. Bush used his veto power for the first time to strike down a bill authorising further federal Administration support for stem cell research. He went on to say, "Each of these human embryos is a unique human life with inherent dignity and matchless value - these boys and girls are not spare parts." When I heard that emotive line, I couldn't help wondering why the lives of coalition soldiers killed in Iraq were any different. Hadn't they been used as "spare parts", political embryos sacrificed for a greater good?

Like Bush, our own Health Minister, Tony Abbott, argues that stem cell research crosses a moral line. That line must now be bent out of shape by his support for the war.

In a speech arguing the moral case for the Iraq war in 2004, Abbott said, "It's an odd moral universe where it's immoral to risk hundreds of Western lives to save hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives."

For some reason Abbott and Bush have justified the use of soldiers' lives for the greater good but not that of embryos, thereby having a hypocritical stance on the sanctity of life.

The Anglican and Catholic churches, however, have been more consistent in their views, opposing both the war and stem cell research. This gives them a respected stance in the debate.

Particular politicians always seem to bring the sanctity-of-life issue to the forefront of the stem-cell debate. But if they supported the moral argument for the war then they must also support the moral argument for stem cell research.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, as a leading advocate of the Iraq war, has already taken this view and has helped Britain become one of the world's leaders in stem cell research. In 2004 the British Government set up the world's first stem cell bank, which stores and assures the quality of human stem cell lines used in research.

Even the Republican-controlled US Congress and Senate strongly endorsed relaxing restrictions on stem cell research, before Bush opposed it.

By agreeing to a conscience vote here on the stem-cell issue, Prime Minister John Howard has at least recognised its moral complexity. But it remains to be seen whether he and others will demonstrate moral consistency and argue for the greater good, as they did when sending our soldiers to Iraq.

Dr McNeil is a Faculty of Science research fellow at the University of NSW.

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