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Stem-cell task 'too difficult'

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ONE of the companies linked to Australian research into embryonic stem-cell treatments — a field which receives \$100 million in taxpayer funding — has abandoned its efforts.

ES Cell International, a Singapore company that was involved in research at Monash University and holds rights to therapies, has pulled out of the pursuit of cures for diabetes and heart damage.

According to *Science* magazine, ESI withdrew because the pursuit of cures in biotechnology “proved really difficult” and had become “very expensive”.

The company was one of the key proponents of embryonic stem-cell research legislative change in Australia, with the aid of Monash professor Alan Trounson.

Some state governments are considering cloning laws to complement federal changes designed to encourage embryonic stem-cell research.

ESI will now use embryonic stem cells for basic research and drug testing.

Federal parliament last year extended laws allowing stem-cell research on frozen embryos to permit cloning of embryos for research. John Howard and Kevin Rudd opposed the changes in a conscience vote.

Last night, Nationals Senate leader Ron Boswell said the departure of ESI from the field would “sound alarm bells to investors in this much-hyped biotech sector”.

Senator Boswell, a longstanding critic of embryonic stem-cell research, said MPs had been “conned into supporting the destruction and cloning of embryos purely to support a highly risky investment market which is now falling apart”.

Professor Trounson reportedly told *Science* that he was “profoundly disappointed” that ESI was giving up.