

Professor urges broader focus for stemcell research

■ By Dawn Gibson

STEMCELLS harvested from adults rather than embryos could hold the cure to spinal cord injuries and degenerative diseases like Parkinson's, a scientific forum on stemcell research has been told.

University of WA Professor Alan Harvey, who has been researching potential cures for neurological disorders for more than two decades, said media hype over the controversial use of embryonic stemcells had overshadowed progress being made on alternatives.

Speaking at the forum in Subiaco yesterday, Professor Harvey also pointed the finger at Hollywood actor Christopher Reeve, who has become the poster boy of stemcell research since he was left paralysed by a horseriding accident seven years ago. Professor Harvey said Reeve's visit to Australia earlier this year was not helpful to researchers, as he advocated only embryonic stemcells as a possible cure for spinal injuries.

Professor Harvey said studies around the world had indicated several

types of cells from adults could hold the key to neurological disorders besides stemcells, such as cells from umbilical cord blood and bone marrow.

Professor Harvey said it made sense to examine other options first, considering the ethical issues.

While scientists were interested in using "spare" embryos — those produced through fertility programs — it was possible in the future there would be a push for embryos to be produced purely for curing diseases in adults, he said.

"My view is that research into adult stemcells should be financed and encouraged as enthusiastically as that of embryonic stemcells," Professor Harvey said.

"If we don't push this line of research, we may end up grappling with ethical issues that inhibit stemcell research unnecessarily, given that there is this alternative potential resource."

Last year, the Federal Government announced a three-year moratorium on therapeutic cloning.

The Genetic Support Council of WA organised the forum.

