

**All Things Considered**, National Public Radio  
**June 1, 2004, Edition: 8:00-9:00 PM**

Profile: Efforts of Bernard Siegel to convince UN delegates of the value of therapeutic cloning

Article Text:

ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

Tomorrow morning, a group of leading scientists will gather at the United Nations to talk about human cloning. They'll try to convince UN delegates that while cloning to make a baby should be banned, cloning to make stem cells should be permitted. Interest groups are always trying to influence UN members. What makes tomorrow's effort interesting is that, as NPR's Joe Palca reports, it came about largely through the efforts of one man.

JOE PALCA reporting:

Until a few years ago, most of what Bernard Siegel knew about cloning came from "Jurassic Park" and "Brave New World." Then, in 1997, came Dolly, the cloned sheep and, in December 2002, the Raelians and Clonaid.

Mr. BERNARD SIEGEL (Attorney): And I was watching television and spotted on CNN this lady--you know, sort of dressed like Morticia Addams--coming up to the microphone and saying that she had cloned a child.

PALCA: That lady was Clonaid's Brigitte Boisselier speaking at a news conference in Ft. Lauderdale.

Mr. SIEGEL: I was kind of surprised like everyone else, and even more surprised that no one seemed to be doing anything about it.

PALCA: Siegel is a lawyer in Florida and spent the first part of his career doing child custody law. He knew he could ask the state to assign a legal guardian for the baby Boisselier said had been born.

Mr. SIEGEL: I thought I might make a footnote in some legal journal as the first case to protect a cloned child, if it was true.

PALCA: But Clonaid and the Raelians offered no evidence there was a child, and now most people dismiss their claim.

The experience increased Siegel's interest in cloning. He began talking to cloning and stem cell researchers and hanging out at their scientific meetings. He took a leave of absence from his law practice. Siegel says cloning to produce a baby is wrong, but he became convinced that the other use of cloning--to make stem cells for research and potential therapy--should go forward. Many scientists believe cloned stem cells may someday cure a variety of diseases.

Mr. SIEGEL: When I started off, I didn't know for sure whether this research was right or ethical; I had to really study the issue. But in the end, I felt not only was it right, it's imperative to go forward, it's imperative to have the funding and it's imperative to try to educate key decision-makers not to ban research in its infancy.

PALCA: Now another issue has appeared on Siegel's radar. Later this year, the United Nations will consider banning all cloning. Siegel has made it his cause to try to prevent that. Tomorrow's conference is intended to educate UN delegates about cloning.

Mr. SIEGEL: So that they can make a determination that there is a difference between reproductive cloning, which is very bad, and therapeutic cloning, the most promising medical breakthrough. We want to preserve that. They have to be able to understand the difference.

PALCA: Siegel has managed to attract some top scientists to his educational session.

Mr. GERALD SCHATTEN (University of Pittsburgh): I don't know Mr. Siegel very well, but he's one of my heroes because he had the courage and the legal background to show that this Raelian charade was indeed a charade.

PALCA: Gerald Schatten is a cloning researcher at the University of Pittsburgh. Many researchers feel as Schatten does and have been willing to give their time to Siegel's efforts.

Mr. SCHATTEN: To me, it's amazing that an attorney on his own, unpaid, would devote so much time to enabling the legal, the international, the science policy discussions about what will be lost if we prohibit therapeutic cloning research.

PALCA: There are those who believe Siegel is more of a self-promoter than a true believer in the scientific promise of cloning, but Dan Perry dismisses those criticisms. Perry chairs a coalition of scientific societies that support cloning and stem cell research. He says people should be judged by what they can accomplish.

Mr. DAN PERRY (Cloning Supporter): In the case of Bernard Siegel, this is a person that has brought together, at the United Nations, some of the most prominent scientific authorities around the world. I'm not sure how he's done it in a relatively short time, but he has done it.

PALCA: Siegel has devoted himself full-time to cloning issues for the last 15 months. One reason for his passion might be his own successful fight with colon cancer.

Mr. SIEGEL: I think maybe that is a little part of it. I'm good at this, apparently. And if I have the skill sets to proceed, why hold myself back?

PALCA: Just how successful Siegel's conference is will be determined when the UN votes on the issue this fall. Joe Palca, NPR News, Washington.

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Record Number: 200406012002