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U professor speaks on stem cells

Dr. John Wagner spoke to delegates June 2 at a Genetics Policy Institute forum.

By [Jared Roddy](#)

Speaking in defense of stem cell research, University professor Dr. John Wagner addressed a forum of diplomats and scientists at the United Nations headquarters last week.

Wagner, a professor of pediatrics, was one of 12 panelists who spoke to delegates June 2 at a Genetics Policy Institute forum, convened to discuss the possible effects of an international ban on cloning.

Wagner said many opponents worry that stem cell research will lead to human cloning.

“It is the word ‘cloning,’ and that if we learn one technology the fear is that the same technology could produce a human being,” he said.

Last year, the United Nations considered an international ban on all forms of cloning. The vote was pushed to October 2004 to accommodate more research into the matter.

“All the scientists at the panel agreed that reproductive cloning should be banned,” Wagner said. “However all of us were for therapeutic cloning.”

In therapeutic cloning, the cloned egg’s nucleus is removed and replaced by the nucleus from adult cells. The embryo will then produce stem cells for that particular tissue or organ, which can be extracted.

“If I took an anonymous egg and put a cell from your skin in the nucleus, I could derive tissues that would be seen by your body as perfectly matched,” Wagner said.

Another possibility, he said, was to derive diseased cells so scientists could test drugs and treatments on human tissue, without risking harm to humans.

Wagner’s role on the panel was to discuss what steps are next in moving toward clinical trials and what applications embryonic stem cell research could have.

One of the arguments Wagner and his colleagues have

battled is that to create stem cells, one has to destroy the embryos.

“The main issue is that the use of human embryos is crossing a line we don’t think we should cross,” said Steven Calvin, a Medical School assistant professor. “It’s destroying an early form of human life for the benefit of others.”

Wagner maintains that in vitro fertilization clinics would destroy all the embryos anyway. The embryos are leftovers from attempts by couples to get pregnant and are taken only with consent.

Calvin said he was concerned work with human embryos

was still a ways off, and argument over embryonic stem cells diverts attention from the promise of the use of adult stem cells. He recognized their shortcomings, but said no one opposed their use, and they are available now.

Wagner said while adult stem cells have enormous potential, they must come

from the part they are to produce.

“We can make (embryonic stem cells) turn into brain cells,” Wagner said. “You’re not likely to let me take a piece of your brain.”

The forum’s purpose was not to debate the issue, but to present scientific facts about stem cell research and cloning. Members of the assembly reacted with significant interest, Wagner said.

During the past two years, the President’s Council on Bioethics has also been investigating new genetic technology. In its March 2004 report, it suggested several prohibitions including the mixing of animal and human genetic material, and the manipulation of embryos older than 14 days.

Calvin agrees with the president’s council and believes certain guidelines must be established.

“We’re at a point in our

technology right now that we would do ourselves a favor by talking about this and agreeing what we absolutely cannot do,” he said.

Currently there is no law in the U.S. preventing Wagner

or his associates from conducting their research. He said a United Nations ban would not necessarily prohibit him from moving forward either, but he would be remiss to go against a mandate.

“If our society doesn’t want stem cell research, obviously I’d go along with it,” Wagner said. “But I want the decision to be made on truth, not misinformation.”