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Clone Newcomer Bends U.N.'s Ear

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A Florida attorney who 18 months ago was arguing cases in Coral Gables will find himself educating United Nations delegates on the ins and outs of cloning and stem cells this Wednesday.

Bernie Siegel is as surprised as anyone. One day, Siegel was in a Florida courtroom; less than a week later, he was debating Rael, the supreme leader of the [Raelians](#), believers in aliens and supporters of human cloning, on Connie Chung's now-defunct television show.

Siegel sued [Clonaid](#), an organization that claimed to have cloned a human being in December 2002, to have a guardian appointed for the alleged child. Clonaid members were associated with the Raelian cult, and Siegel worried that if there was a child, it might be treated like a lab rat. Clonaid never showed proof of a child, and the judge threw the case out.

Now, Siegel has a more sophisticated understanding of stem cells and cloning. He no longer associates with the likes of Rael. Instead, he's rubbing elbows with Nobel laureates and organizing the [United Nations conference](#) on the science behind these controversial subjects.

In December 2003, Siegel led a successful effort to quell an attempt by some United Nations members, including the United States and Costa Rica, to pass a treaty banning all human cloning, including the type researchers want to use to develop treatments for diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

The U.N. voted to postpone deciding on a cloning ban for a year. Siegel hopes that this Wednesday's conference, combined with positive embryonic stem-cell study results during 2004, will persuade delegates to vote for a ban on reproductive cloning (which would create a new person), but allow [therapeutic cloning](#) (which scientists believe could lead to disease treatments).

Wired News: Until recently, you were a Florida trial lawyer. How did you find yourself educating the United Nations on stem-cell research and cloning technology?

Bernie Siegel: I filed a case against Clonaid, a company that claimed in December 2002 to have cloned a human being, as a matter of child advocacy. (It was) something I had

done in the beginning of my 30-year career. What made this child any different from a milk-carton child? They had not produced "Baby Eve," so I filed the case to see what would happen.

WN: How did the U.N. conference come about?

Siegel: Because I was looking at this issue as a lawyer, I was thinking to myself -- as I heard the claims of [Panos Zavos](#) from Kentucky -- that he was going to attempt to clone a person. What could be done to stop him? It was a coincidence that Clonaid had made their announcement in Broward County, which is my neighborhood. But it's not as if I was going to file an injunction against Dr. Zavos in Kentucky. Who knew where he was going to do this and what standing did I have to do anything? It really boiled down, in my analysis, to a public-policy issue. Where should the buck stop? It seemed in the United Nations, because a treaty or a convention passed to ban reproductive cloning could halt these so-called scientists who are doing this.

The U.N. had asked the legal commission to pass a treaty banning reproductive cloning, but it got caught up in politics. Certain forces wanted a total ban that included therapeutic cloning. I filed the World Court initiative with the U.N. seeking an advisory opinion on whether reproductive cloning constitutes a crime against humanity. There's strong support in international law to show that reproductive cloning is a crime against humanity. For example, the Nuremberg Code says you can't do human experimentation unless it's based on sound animal experimentation. Well, here we have a procedure in animals that fails most of the time.

WN: So how did you get to the point where you're educating United Nations delegates on cloning and stem-cell science?

Siegel: I realized that I had really stepped into a minefield, and my own reputation was at stake for having filed this case. People were asking me if I was a Raelian, for example. Was I in cahoots with them? I wanted to find out everything I could about [Brigitte Boisselier](#) and the movement, and for that matter about cloning. Much to my dismay I found out that Boisselier and Rael had testified in Congress, as had Dr. Panos Zavos, and that they had appeared before the National Academy of Science, and were having a rather profound impact on the public-policy debate relating to the cloning of stem cells.

During the case I had reached out to some really prominent scientists. Ian Wilmut, who, of course, was the scientist who led the team that cloned Dolly, and Rudolf Jaenisch were very much in favor that I had tried to find the truth in this situation.

I recruited some pre-eminent scientists to the advisory board of a nonprofit organization I originally called the Human Cloning Policy Institute (I eventually changed the name to the [Genetics Policy Institute](#)). I also recruited Doug Melton of Harvard, who's really well-regarded and his children have diabetes; Lawrence Goldstein, who headed the public-policy committee of the American Society of Cell Biology; Allen Trouncen in Australia who gets a gold star in my book because he was actually sued by [Dr. Severino Antinori](#) (a

pro-reproductive cloning researcher) for libel. I think Trouncen called him a madman or something and he was successful at getting the case dismissed.

WN: Do you believe a reproductive cloning ban would clear the way for therapeutic cloning?

Siegel: Actually, it would. I think the issues have to be uncoupled somehow. If there was this advisory opinion and reproductive cloning was specifically declared a crime against humanity, people would be less likely to do it. They would be so completely ostracized because it would be against international law. People would not want to aid or abet a scientist who might be inclined to do this. And they couldn't go out on a barge in the middle of the ocean and set up a clinic. But it wouldn't touch therapeutic cloning.

WN: Will your conference focus on trying to sway the U.N.'s opinions in your direction?

Siegel: No. We were welcomed by the U.N. to present a science conference. Since I have some top scientists on my board, we want to provide an opportunity for the delegations to get facts, not propaganda, as to what the science of reproductive cloning and therapeutic cloning is, and what the consequences will be to science if a treaty ban is imposed.

We don't endorse candidates; we're not a political organization. The educational campaign in the United Nations ran head-on into (President) Bush's opinions on it, but our goal is education. We feel the public needs to know, the media needs to know and we want the Genetics Policy Institute to be the gateway of knowledge for cloning information.