



Scientists ask UN for stem cell research

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UNITED NATIONS, New York (Reuters) -- Top scientists from the United States, South Korea, Australia and Britain pressed the United Nations on Tuesday not to ban stem cell research as part of a global treaty banning human cloning.

The scientists said they invited U.N. delegates to a conference on Wednesday to make the case a U.N. treaty in the works since 2001 should ban only the cloning of human beings - - known as "reproductive cloning" -- while letting researchers pursue "therapeutic cloning" studies with enormous potential for treating disease and saving lives.

The 191-nation U.N. General Assembly is deeply divided over whether to allow such research to continue or adopt a broad cloning ban championed by the Bush administration and Costa Rica with strong backing from the U.S. anti-abortion movement and many predominantly Roman Catholic nations.

In a setback for the Bush administration, the assembly last year put treaty negotiations on hold for a year, acting after 66 scientific academies around the world expressed their support for therapeutic cloning.

That means the issue is due to resurface during the new General Assembly session opening in September.

Among those scheduled to attend Wednesday's conference were Dr. Ian Wilmut, of Britain's Roslin Institute, who led the team that produced the first cloned mammal, Dolly the sheep, and Dr. Douglas Melton of Harvard Medical School, who led a team that recently announced 17 new lines of stem cells created from human fertilized eggs that had been destined to be discarded.

Cloning research relies on embryo cells, or stem cells, because they can grow into all types of cells and tissues in the body.

Supporters of a broad cloning ban portray therapeutic cloning -- in which cells from cloned human embryos are used in medical research -- as the taking of human lives because the embryos are eventually destroyed.

But Gerald Fischbach, dean of New York's Columbia University Medical School, said the view that human embryo studies amounted to murder stemmed not from religious

doctrine but from "a fundamentalist doctrine."

"It's a matter of a definition of when life begins. It's a very difficult question (that) must be balanced by the potential to help millions and millions of people," he said.

"Reproductive cloning shouldn't be done. It's extremely dangerous to both the offspring and the mother. But the benefits of therapeutic cloning are really quite enormous," said Dr. Alan Trounson of Australia's Monash University.