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### **Scientists Lobby UN to Allow Stem-Cell Research**

Leading scientists from four continents gathered on June 2 at the UN headquarters in New York to lobby for embryonic stem-cell research.

The landmark event, organised by the Genetics Policy Institute (GPI), took place 3 months before the UN General Assembly opens its next session, at which a general treaty to ban all forms of human cloning may be approved.

"The Genetics Policy Institute and scientific leaders in the biomedical research community have come to the United Nations today to openly discuss the repercussion of an international ban on therapeutic cloning", said GPI Director Bernard Siegel.

Last year, GPI played a major part in defending therapeutic cloning in the UN, which was considering a ban on all forms of cloning. In particular, the Bush administration last year signed on to a complete cloning ban put forward by Costa Rica and 60 other nations. A smaller group of countries, led by Belgium and other European countries, was in favour of a ban on only reproductive cloning.

The tension prompted a bloc of over 50 Islamic nations, led by Iran, to propose delaying the vote for 2 years to study the issue further. Eventually, however, the US government and its anti-cloning allies persuaded other countries to reduce the delay to 1 year, which means the proposal will be taken up by the UN next September (Lancet 2003; 362: 2074).

Actor Christopher Reeve, an outspoken proponent of embryonic stem-cell research, provided last week's meeting with a taped introduction. Harvard University's Douglas Melton told delegates that the "UN has a responsibility to help untold millions of people with degenerative disorders".

"The UN has an opportunity to show the world that political confusion cannot stand in the way of allowing medical science to alleviate human suffering", said patient advocate Danny Heumann, who had a spinal cord injury at age 18.

If a treaty banning all cloning passes next autumn, countries that allow therapeutic cloning might find themselves in a confusing situation.

"Banning this is a very bad idea but we have stated on the panel that each and every country should decide themselves about laws and regulations on this subject", conference panelist Alan Trounson, from Australia's Monash University, told The Lancet. "I hope that sense will prevail and the UN gives us a chance to demonstrate the merits and power of stem-cell research, which includes work on therapeutic cloning", he added.