

Dolly scientists press UN to allow stem cell research

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THE leader of the team behind Dolly the sheep is among a group of scientists pressing the United Nations not to ban stem cell research as part of a global treaty banning human cloning.

The scientists, including researchers from the US, South Korea and Australia, said they invited UN delegates to a conference yesterday to make the case against a UN treaty in the process of formulation since 2001.

They want the agreement to ban only the cloning of human beings, known as reproductive cloning, while letting researchers pursue what was described as therapeutic cloning studies with enormous potential for treating disease and saving lives.

Among them is Dr Ian Wilmut, of the Roslin Institute, who led the team that produced the first cloned mammal, Dolly.

The 191-nation UN General Assembly is deeply divided over whether to allow such research to continue or adopt a broad cloning ban championed by the Bush administration in the US and Costa Rica with strong backing from the US 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.

The issue is due to resurface in the new General Assembly session opening in September.

Also among the scientists lobbying the UN was Dr Douglas Melton, of Harvard Medical School, who led a team that recently announced 17 new lines of stem cells created from human fertilised 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. However, 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 what he said was a fundamentalist doctrine.