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UN considers cloning - again

Observers say the outcome of a vote on cloning next week is too close to call | By Stephen Pincock

The United Nations (UN) is due to revisit the vexed issue of an international convention against reproductive cloning next week, and observers are expecting more of the wrangling that has bedeviled the subject in the past.

Last Thursday (October 7), the UN confirmed that the agenda item "international convention against the reproductive cloning of human beings" will be taken up again in the Sixth Committee of the General Assembly, on October 21 and 22.

The UN has been trying to reach agreement on a convention for more than 2 years. In 2002, talks within a working group on the issue stalled because of fundamental disagreements over whether the proposed treaty should ban all cloning or only reproductive cloning.

In November last year, following more squabbling, the UN's legal committee (the Sixth Committee) voted to delay discussions for 2 more years. Nations had divided their support between two proposals: one put forward by Belgium that would ban only reproductive cloning and another by Costa Rica that sought to forbid all forms of cloning.

The Belgian proposal was backed by about 20 of the UN's 191 members, including Britain, Brazil, China, and Japan. The Costa Rican draft was supported by about 60 countries including the United States, Italy, Spain, the Philippines, and Portugal.

But the 2-year wait was later shortened to 1 year, after last-minute discussions between members of the Belgian proposal and the 57-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which had introduced the original proposal for a 2-year delay.

Britain's Royal Society, which is one of the many scientific bodies that oppose a ban on therapeutic cloning, anticipates a close debate. "It still looks to be finely balanced," a spokesman told *The Scientist*.

Islamic nations may again play a crucial role. Science groups think that Iran, which proposed the initial delay on behalf of the OIC, may vote for the Belgian proposal, for example. Malaysia, which is the current head of the OIC, will also likely be influential. "It's not clear what they're intending to do," the spokesman said.

Douglas A. Sylva, director of research at the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute—which supports a total cloning ban—pointed out that on this issue, there seems to be a distinction between Muslim countries in general and Arab Muslim countries.

"There's no consensus in the Muslim world about this and the great uncertainty seems to lie with the Arab states," Sylva told *The Scientist*. "The Arab nations hold the wild card."

Meanwhile, the lobbying goes on. The InterAcademy Panel (IAP), an umbrella group representing science academies, has been pushing hard in support of a convention that does not ban therapeutic cloning. As of August, 67 academies had signed an IAP statement on the subject, supporting therapeutic cloning.

At the United Nations headquarters in New York on Wednesday (October 13), patients were to have their say when the Genetics Policy Institute, the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, and the Republic of Korea UN mission was scheduled to hold a joint press conference urging UN decision-makers to reject a vote banning nuclear transfer.

The press conference was scheduled to include a taped message from Christopher Reeve, the actor and research advocate who died earlier this week. "The message from Christopher Reeve to the United Nations is 'Don't ban therapeutic cloning—it would destroy the hope of millions,'" Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute told *The Scientist.*

Siegel, reached on his cell phone as the press conference was about to begin, said he also thought the outcome of the UN process was too close to call. "I think it's going to be extremely tight," he said. "Of course, we hope the voices of reason will prevail."

Sylva, on the other hand, felt the backers of the Costa Rican proposal would be a powerful force. In his view, the debate will likely boil down to a choice between passing the Costa Rican proposal and further delay. "The momentum is all on the side of the Costa Rican proposal," he said.