

Scientists, Patients Fight UN Stem Cell Study Ban

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By Irwin Arieff

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - A coalition of 125 scientific and patients' groups urged the United Nations ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) on Wednesday to reject a global ban on stem cell research sought by the Bush administration and more than 50 other countries.

At an emotional news conference, scientists evoked the memory of paralyzed "Superman" actor Christopher Reeve, an ardent campaigner for stem cell research who died on Sunday at 52, while individuals with a range of diseases pleaded with the world body not to take away their hope for a cure.

A committee of the 191-nation U.N. General Assembly is scheduled to open debate on Oct. 21 on the drafting of a treaty on human cloning, an issue pending in the assembly since 2001.

All 191 U.N. members agree on a treaty that would prohibit the cloning of human beings. But they are sharply divided over whether to allow the cloning of human embryos for stem cell or similar research, known as "therapeutic cloning."

Supporters of a broad global treaty banning all forms of cloning, led by the United States and Costa Rica, view therapeutic cloning as the taking of human lives.

But advocates of the use of cloned human embryos for research say the technique holds out the hope of a cure for hundreds of millions of people with a wide range of diseases such as cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes and spinal cord damage.

The issue has become a major focus of the U.S. presidential election campaign, with President Bush ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) opposing government funding for any research involving human embryos and his Democratic opponent, Sen. John Kerry ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) of Massachusetts, calling for the aggressive pursuit of such research.

RIVAL RESOLUTIONS

In a setback for the Bush White House, the assembly's legal committee decided by a one-vote margin last November to put off for two years the writing of any international treaty on cloning. The full assembly later decided to defer negotiations for just one year.

When the legal committee meets next week, it will have before it rival draft resolutions on how to proceed.

A text by Costa Rica and the United States denounces cloning in any form as "unethical, morally reproachable and contrary to due respect for the human person" and instructs treaty writers to

draft a document banning the practice.

That measure has 57 co-sponsors, most of them either predominantly Catholic, small island states or poverty-stricken developing nations.

A second resolution drafted by Belgium and with 21 co-sponsors, many of them active in scientific research, would call for a draft treaty banning only the cloning of human beings. It would leave it up to individual governments to decide whether to ban or regulate therapeutic cloning.

"The time is now to support science. Cures could be within our reach. I implore the United Nations not to ban this desperately needed research," Richard Schmidt of New Jersey, diagnosed 10 years ago with Parkinson's disease ([news](#) - [web sites](#)), told reporters at U.N. headquarters, his hands vibrating alarmingly.

"Please do not take hope away from us," said Lina Meruane of Chile, who lost her sight to diabetes and worries now about losing a limb or a kidney.

But the Vatican ([news](#) - [web sites](#)), in a position paper issued on Wednesday, said therapeutic cloning was even worse than reproductive cloning. In therapeutic cloning, "one uses the newly produced human being as mere laboratory material," it said.