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PoliSci: U.N. cannot stop cloning

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 25 (UPI) -- A United Nations proposal to ban all cloning of human embryos -- including cloning done for research or therapeutic purposes -- will shift but not stop the research, experts agreed.

The U.N. General Assembly spent a good part of last week debating two proposals to ban human cloning before once again delaying the deciding vote. The cloning techniques being discussed involve replacing the genetic material in a human egg with genetic material from another person. The cell is then encouraged to divide, creating a human embryo.

Though the technology does not yet exist, it is theoretically possible such an embryo could be implanted into a woman's womb. The resulting child would have identical genes to the person who donated the implanted genetic material. Both proposals before the United Nations would ban cloning for reproductive purposes and there is no disagreement on such a ban.

The primary reason researchers want to clone human embryos, however, is to advance research into embryonic stem cells. Such cells, made within the first few weeks after an egg is fertilized, have the potential to grow into nearly every type of functional cell.

Many scientists think embryonic stem cells have the potential to restore spinal cord injuries and cure diabetes and other illnesses, such as Parkinson's disease, by replacing malfunctioning cells. Genetically identical stem cells, perhaps cloned with the genetic material of the ill person, could help limit rejection by the body and simplify therapy.

Studying embryonic stem cells, however, requires destruction of a human embryo, a move deeply offensive to the ethics of many people who consider the embryo to be a child -- albeit at a very early stage of growth.

A proposal from Costa Rica, co-sponsored by the United States, Australia and a host of mostly developing nations, would forbid cloning to create human embryos for research or the treatment of disease. Though it would not ban all cloning work, or necessarily research on stem cells, it effectively would ban human embryonic-stem-cell research in countries that signed the treaty.

A Belgium proposal, co-sponsored by the United Kingdom and several other European nations, as well as China, Japan and South Korea, would not ban embryonic-stem-cell research.

With the exception of the United States, supporters of the Costa Rican language largely are nations not now engaged in embryonic-stem-cell research, while supporters of the Belgian proposal generally are doing research in the area. Such research also is conducted in the United States, but it is restricted if federal money is being used. There are no limits if the research is privately funded, however.

Not all of the no-research nations support a ban. For example, the African nations -- facing a devastating AIDS epidemic -- do not want to limit their medical research options, said Usha Haley, a professor of management and international business at the University of New Haven in West Haven, Conn.

Last Thursday, the African nations announced they would be voting as a bloc against a complete ban, said Bernard Seigel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute, which opposes such a ban. Seven of those nations originally had co-sponsored the more-restrictive, Costa Rican proposal, Seigel said.

Islamic nations also have backed away from a ban, experts told UPI's PolSci.

"Islamic countries and the African countries do not believe that a birth starts at conception, so they don't want to vote on it at all unless they have to," Haley said.

If supporters of a complete ban do manage to overcome all the hurdles and get a resolution passed, its real impact will be limited, all those interviewed told UPI.

"If the treaty were passed it would only cover those countries that sign it," said Richard Doerflinger, deputy director of pro-life activities for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which supports a total ban.

Countries likely would continue to do what they already are doing, Doerflinger told UPI, though a U.N. convention would provide political reinforcement to those already opposing cloning.

"The United Nations is a very large, very significant and mostly symbolic organization. If all the countries do not accept what the United Nations says, then it does not become reality," said Haley, who has studied international sanctions extensively.

"The nations have to agree to want to cooperate on this," she said. "If they don't agree to cooperate, the agreement is dead in the water."

The business community is not likely to back away even in the face of a ban, said Zachary Zimmerman, senior research analyst at Life Science Insights of Framingham, Mass. Zimmerman follows the biotech industry, including the 50-or-so firms engaged in embryonic-stem-cell research and deals with investment and venture capital firms.

"I don't think it is going to affect the industry," Zimmerman told UPI. "It would be more of a rallying cry for people who support the ban and it would disappoint the people who support stem cell research, but really it is not going to change the way that these companies are going continue doing therapeutic research or not."

Cloning and stem cell research would continue, experts agreed, but it likely would take place in locales already supporting it.

The scenario already is playing out on a smaller scale in the United States.

Harvard University recently raised \$5 million in private money for its new Harvard Stem Cell Institute and plans to clone human embryos. New Jersey and California are planning to invest millions in such research to build the biotech industry in their states. Other states, however -- including Arkansas, Iowa, Michigan, North Dakota and South Dakota -- have banned human cloning

for any reason.

Dr. Rudolf Jaenisch of the Whitehead Institute -- just down the street from Harvard in Cambridge, Mass. -- helped demonstrate two years ago that a genetic defect in mice could be repaired using stem cells obtained through cloning. He thinks a cloning ban will affect funding and increase the distance between the "haves" and "have nots."

"I think I'm prevented from getting into working with human cells because of the situation on (federal) funding," Jaenisch told UPI. "There is no way I could even get funding here in this country."

There still is a long way to go before any ban is in place. The vote has been delayed until after the U.S. election Nov. 2 -- partly so as not to influence the election, but also because the U.S. position could change under a new administration, Haley said.

In the meantime, an agreement on banning cloning to produce children languishes. The procedure is condemned by nearly every nation. Such universal support would likely make a U.N. ban quite effective.

"I think it is unprecedented that all the countries in the world agree on anything," said Haley. "They have agreed that reproductive cloning is bad."

Considering the pace of technological change, Haley continued, "and how many centers of technology there now are, I think it's extremely important now that the genie is out of the bottle to somehow contain (cloning technology). One of the ways to do that is get a ban on reproductive cloning as fast as you can do it."

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