

U.N. mulls ban on human cloning, including for research

But proposals differ on cloning of embryos to create stem cells

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WASHINGTON - The United Nations is expected to consider today whether to embrace a proposal backed by the Bush White House for a global ban on human cloning, including therapeutic cloning of embryos for research aimed at curing a range of diseases and conditions.

All 191 U.N. member nations agree on a treaty to ban cloning to create human beings, or what is called reproductive cloning. But the world body has been as divided as the U.S. Congress - and, in fact, as the president's own Council on Bioethics - on the question of cloning embryos to create stem cells for scientific research.

Therapeutic cloning

The question of therapeutic cloning has come before the United Nations twice before and each time been deferred because of the sharp divisions in a body that generally likes to work by consensus.

The same thing could happen again today when the legal committee of the U.N. General Assembly considers a Costa Rican resolution, vigorously championed by the Bush administration, that would ban all human cloning as "morally reproachable and contrary to due respect for the human person."

An alternative resolution, offered by Belgium and supported by Britain, Japan and much of the world's scientific community, has also been proposed. It would ban and condemn reproductive cloning but allow each country to decide whether to permit embryonic cloning for stem cell research.

Earlier this week, amid the stark division among nations, Italy offered a compromise "declaration" - a statement without the weight of a treaty that could give the United Nations a way out of dealing with the thorny and divisive issue.

That resolution is artfully - and ambiguously - worded to ban the creation of "human life," rather than "human beings," through cloning. Both sides might agree to such language since proponents

of the Costa Rican and U.S. position believe an embryo qualifies as "human life" while the pro-research side does not.

But as of yesterday, there was still so much disagreement among member nations that many were calling for yet another postponement of any action.

A symbolic victory?

Even if the U.N. committee recommends - and the General Assembly later this year passes - the U.S.-backed cloning ban, the victory for the Bush administration and other opponents of therapeutic cloning would be largely symbolic, at least in the short term.

To ratify the treaty, the U.S. Senate would have to pass it by a two-thirds majority, which is considered highly unlikely. Although measures to prohibit all forms of human cloning have passed in the House twice, they have never won enough support in the Senate, where even a number of conservative, anti-abortion rights Republicans, such as Sen. Orrin G. Hatch of Utah, favor therapeutic cloning and the stem cell research it would afford.

"We feel comfortable, even with the new [Republican] members in the Senate, that therapeutic cloning will continue to enjoy a strong bipartisan majority," says Daniel Perry, president of the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, an umbrella group of patient advocacy groups, universities and scientific societies.

It is unclear how many nations would ratify a treaty banning all forms of cloning. The British ambassador to the United Nations has said Britain, which is already embarking on cloning for medical research, would not sign or abide by the treaty.

Still, research advocates in the United States believe that if the United Nations signs off on a global treaty banning therapeutic cloning, it could have a chilling effect on research and breathe new life into congressional efforts to pass a ban.

The other side agrees. In the wake of a presidential election in which religious conservatives played a large role, "to get a signal that the global community is on the same side, there would be a much stronger chance we might see some movement on these bills," says David Prentice, a senior fellow at the Family Research Council, which opposes therapeutic cloning and embryonic stem cell research.

The President's Council on Bioethics is split on the question of whether to allow therapeutic cloning, in which an embryo is created through a cloning procedure and then destroyed when stem cells are extracted from it. The council was not involved in the administration's effort to push through the Costa Rican resolution.

And John C. Danforth, the former Republican senator from Missouri who since June has been the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was a strong and vocal proponent of embryonic stem cell research and therapeutic cloning as recently as May. Since assuming the diplomatic post, he has been silent on the issue.

But Bush urged the United Nations to reject all human cloning when he addressed the General Assembly in September.

Saying that he supported the Costa Rican resolution, he urged all governments "to affirm a basic ethical principle: No human life should ever be produced or destroyed for the benefit of another.

Because we believe in human dignity, we should take seriously the protection [of] life from exploitation under any pretext."

The Costa Rican proposal has 62 co-sponsors, including the United States and mostly Roman Catholic countries and developing nations. The Vatican made its first speech ever to the General Assembly last month in support of the ban.

The Belgian option that prohibits cloning to create a human being but would allow nations to engage in therapeutic cloning if it is highly regulated is supported by 22 mostly European countries and much of the scientific and medical community in the United States and elsewhere.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said last month that a decision should be left to the member states, but that he supported therapeutic cloning.

Muslim nations, largely undecided, have been opposed to a vote on either of the options because the issue has been so polarizing.

Scientists believe embryonic stem cells, extracted from days-old embryos, hold great promise for treating diseases such as juvenile diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, as well as spinal cord injuries because these master cells can reproduce into any of the body's cell types.

Some research suggests that stem cells from cloned embryos hold more promise for eventual therapies than those derived from surplus embryos at fertility clinics, because the cloned embryos could be created from a patient's own cells, lessening the chance of rejection by that person's immune system.

To date, the process of cloning human embryos for research has only been achieved in South Korea where, in February, scientists became the first to successfully clone human embryos and cultivate stem cells from them after a few days.

Recently, England gave researchers at a fertility center permission to allow such a procedure, and scientists at Harvard University asked its ethics board last month for permission to create cloned embryos for stem cell research.

Scientists are confident that California will soon become a center for such research in the United States because the state just voted in favor of a \$3 billion ballot initiative for embryonic stem cell research, which allows state funding of therapeutic cloning.

Much of the scientific community believes this research could result in the "greatest medical breakthroughs of our lifetime," says Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute, a stem cell research advocacy group.

But opponents like Bush believe it is wrong to create an embryo, which they consider a human life, for the purpose of destroying it, even in the name of science. They also believe it could lead eventually to the cloning of human babies, which both sides of the debate fiercely condemn.

Indeed, even advocates of therapeutic cloning say the procedure is a much tougher sell than embryonic stem cell research, which polls suggest is favored by a majority of Americans.

"It's the 'ick' factor," says Perry. "Everyone thinks cloning is a bad Saturday morning movie."

