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Scientists lobby the UN to ban cloning

By Roger Highfield

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Scientists from four continents will gather at the United Nations this week to campaign for a ban on the cloning of babies.

They hope to persuade ambassadors to break a diplomatic deadlock over achieving a worldwide ban on the technique without curbing research on the cloning of early human embryos, which has the potential to lead to new treatments.

Among those who will speak at the event in New York on Wednesday are Prof Ian Wilmut, of the Roslin Institute, near Edinburgh, the first to clone from an adult cell.

Other speakers will include Dr Woo Suk Hwang, the Korean scientist who first cloned a human embryo, and one of the most prominent patients who could benefit from this research, the actor Christopher Reeve, who will provide a taped introduction.

"There will be absolute unanimity on reproductive cloning," said Prof Wilmut. "If you attempted to clone a person now, it would result in late abortions and dead children."

Equally, he is adamant that using cloning as a route to stem cells, master cells in the body, offers such great medical potential that this therapeutic form of cloning early embryos must not be banned. He is preparing a proposal to do such work himself.

A significant number of countries back the "Costa Rican proposal", notably the United States, which would have outlawed both human reproductive and therapeutic cloning, ending research on a wide range of treatments.

The US position is "an enormous handicap for the field", said Prof Wilmut. US biomedical research is already "severely limited" in embryonic stem cell research.

Because it represents a significant proportion of the world's research, the US administration is slowing the development of a range of new treatments for heart disease, diabetes and other illnesses.



Time for reflection: Prof Ian Wilmut of the Roslin Institute, which cloned Dolly the sheep

If the US lifted the ban on funding for embryo and cloning research, there would be a huge surge in the research, said Prof Wilmut. Even if the UN adopted the Costa Rican proposal, it would not be mandatory in the UK.

However, Prof Wilmut said the decision would offer powerful support for the pro-life movement, which opposes all forms cloning, and influence discussions in Europe that may also hinder research.

Prof Wilmut and the other scientists back the Belgian convention, which aims to ban human reproductive cloning but would allow individual states to decide whether to legislate against therapeutic cloning.

Supporters argue that, despite the potential benefits of therapeutic cloning, the different views about the ethics of research on early human embryos in different countries makes unanimity on this issue difficult.

Policy on therapeutic cloning should therefore be determined at national level. The effort to lobby UN delegates is led by Bernard Siegel, a Florida-based lawyer.

"A UN vote to ban this important scientific research would be tragic and destroy the hopes of millions suffering from Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes, cancer, spinal cord injuries, heart disease and other devastating conditions," he said.

A spokesman for the Michael J Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research said: "As a leading funder of cell replacement research in Parkinson's disease, the foundation supports this effort to provide credible information to UN policy makers and the public that draws a distinct line between scientific research that seeks to alleviate human suffering and potential reproductive cloning, which we oppose."

After two narrow votes on the issue, the last in December, the UN decided to delay discussion until later this year. The Royal Society, the national academy of science, has already started lobbying the British Government.

Lord May, the president, said: "Research into therapeutic cloning has the potential to help millions of people worldwide because it could help us to develop stem cell treatments and cures.

"We hope that the UN General Assembly recognises that individual countries should be allowed to decide for themselves about the ethical issues surrounding therapeutic cloning.

"However, if the United Nations votes for an extreme ban that outlaws this promising area of research, we urge the UK Government not to sign the convention."