

# UN bans reproductive cloning

## Non-legally binding agreement doesn't explicitly address therapeutic cloning | By [Alison McCook](#)



The legal committee of the United [Nations' General Assembly](#) voted on Friday (February 18) by a slim majority in favor of a non-legally binding agreement that asks member states to prohibit reproductive cloning and adopt legislation to respect "human dignity" and "human life." But the text, which one diplomat said was intentionally ambiguous, does not define when life begins.

The final declaration asks member states to "prohibit all forms of human cloning inasmuch as they are incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life." If adopted and approved by the General Assembly, the declaration is not legally binding, so there would be no penalties for countries that do not implement relevant legislation.

The latest declaration, slightly modified from an [earlier proposal](#) put forth by Italy in November, was drafted as a compromise between two deeply divided groups, one of which called for an outright ban on all forms of cloning.

In the hours leading up to Friday's meeting, both sides fiercely debated the declaration's language, and it was unclear whether a vote would even take place. The vote reflected the committee's indecision: out of 191 member states, the final tally was 71 for to 35 against, with many abstentions.

The UN has been [trying to reach agreement](#) on a [stance on cloning](#) for [more than 2 years](#), during which time the member states were split between two resolutions. The first, put forth by Costa Rica and supported by the United States, proposed a total ban on all forms of cloning. Another submitted by Belgium and supported by the United Kingdom recommended a ban on human reproductive cloning and left the decision about therapeutic cloning up to individual states.

A Belgian diplomat told *The Scientist* that many countries that supported stem cell research decided to vote against the declaration because it could be interpreted as a ban against therapeutic cloning, even though it did not explicitly do so. "The intention of Costa Rica and the US was very clear," he said.

The diplomat explained that he fought to change the language of the text from "human life" to "human being," because it could be argued that life begins at conception. However, the text is vague enough that countries that want to continue stem cell research should not feel impeded by it, the diplomat said. "It is indeed a weak text, quite ambiguous, which is open to interpretation. And that was the goal," he said.

Bernard Siegel, executive director of the [Genetics Policy Institute](http://www.genpol.org/), who watched the debates, said that many member states were disappointed that the controversy over therapeutic cloning forced members to take a weaker stand against reproductive cloning, which countries unanimously oppose. "The UN lost sight of its purpose," he said.

Still, the Belgian diplomat said that after years of debate, he is glad to put the cloning issue to rest. "I'm relieved it's over," he said.

Links for this article

United Nations General Assembly 59th Session

<http://www.un.org/ga/59/>

A. McCook, "UN proposes cloning compromise," *The Scientist*, November 23, 2004.

<http://www.biomedcentral.com/news/20041123/02>

T. Tamkins, "UN delays cloning vote," *The Scientist*, November 7, 2003.

<http://www.biomedcentral.com/news/20031107/08/>

T. Tamkins, "UN to vote on cloning in a year," *The Scientist*, December 10, 2003.

<http://www.biomedcentral.com/news/20031210/05/>

C. Soares, "UN cloning talks bog down," *The Scientist*, October 1, 2002.

<http://www.biomedcentral.com/news/20021001/05/>

Genetics Policy Institute

<http://www.genpol.org/>