



Tuesday, May 20, 2008 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Britain to allow blended human, animal embryos

By Mary Jordan
The Washington Post

LONDON — British lawmakers voted Monday to allow the use of animal-human embryos for research after a national debate that pitted religious leaders who called it unethical against the prime minister and scientists who said it would help cure disease.

Last month, scientists at Newcastle created part-human, part-animal embryos for the first time in Britain. An attempt Monday night to ban the process, during consideration in the House of Commons of the first major revisions to embryo research laws in a generation, failed overwhelmingly on a vote of 336 to 176.

The overall bill, argued Prime Minister Gordon Brown, would enable lifesaving research that could help people with Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and other diseases. He said in an article published in the Observer newspaper Sunday, "I believe that we owe it to ourselves and future generations to introduce these measures."

The bill would allow scientists to continue injecting an empty cow or rabbit egg with human DNA. A burst of electricity then is used to trick the egg into dividing regularly, so it becomes a very early embryo, from which stem cells can be extracted. Scientists say the embryos would not be allowed to develop for more than 14 days and are intended to address the shortage of human embryos available for stem-cell research.

By allowing such mixed embryo experiments, Britain is expected to maintain its reputation as a leading center for stem-cell research.

Cardinal Keith O'Brien, a leading figure in the Catholic Church, had described the research as a "monstrous attack on human rights, human dignity and human life."

He said the bill would allow experiments of "Frankenstein proportion."

Human Genetics Alert, a science watchdog in favor of the ban, claims the laws could lead to the creation of genetically modified "designer babies."

Lawmakers also voted late Monday to support the government's plans to allow "savior siblings," the screening of embryos for genetic characteristics in cases in which a parent is seeking a child to help a diseased older child in need of tissue donation.

A final vote on the package is expected is coming weeks.

The idea of blending human and animal DNA to make "chimeric" embryos for research has long been contentious in the United States, where such experiments are legal if conducted without public funding.

Legislation introduced in the Senate and House would ban the creation of the embryos even with private money — a move that has raised concerns from scientists and patient support groups, in part, because it would criminalize an entire branch of biomedical research.

In November, Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kansas, introduced the Human-Animal Hybrid Prohibition Act, which would amend the federal criminal code to penalize anyone who creates or attempts to create an embryo with human and nonhuman tissue. It has 18 co-sponsors, including presidential candidate John McCain, R-Ariz.

Information from The Associated Press is included in this report.

Copyright © 2008 The Seattle Times Company