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Bush-Kerry election race adds heat to discussion.

The UN is deeply divided over whether to ban all human cloning.

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Members of the United Nations are gearing up to debate a highly contentious issue: whether to introduce an international ban on human cloning.

In the build-up to the debate, a group of patient and medical research advocates yesterday pleaded with UN delegates not to forbid the cloning of human embryos for medical research. They also presented a letter making their case, signed by 125 scientific and patient organizations from around the world.

The UN has been wrestling with whether to regulate human cloning since 2001, and decided to postpone a decision on it after reaching stalemate last year. Its legal committee will take up the discussion again on 21 and 22 October.

As they were last year, UN delegates are deeply divided. One group, led by Costa Rica and backed by nearly 60 countries, including the United States, is calling for a comprehensive ban on cloning. This includes both reproductive cloning to make babies, and the creation of human embryos for use in medical research.

The other group of countries, led by Belgium and backed by over 20 countries, wants a ban on reproductive cloning only. These countries argue that cloning for research should be allowed because stem cells grown from cloned embryos might lead to cures for countless diseases.

The opposing sides have changed little since last year's deliberations. But Spain, for example, has switched away from supporting a blanket ban because of its change from a conservative to a socialist government after elections in March 2004.

Election fervour

The UN discussion comes at the height of arguments about cloning in the run-up to the US presidential election. President George W. Bush opposes the creation of human embryos for medical research, but challenger John Kerry supports it, and the two have sparred publicly about their differences.

The impending election is adding fervour to both sides of the UN debate. Observers say that the United States is intensifying its lobbying for an all-out ban, because this reinforces President Bush's stance.

Those against a blanket ban may prefer to defer any decision in the face of the election, says Marc Pecsteen, a legal advisor at the Belgian mission to the UN. If John Kerry is elected on 2 November, the argument goes, he might switch the US position and their case could gain strength.

Those involved say that it is difficult to predict the outcome of next week's deliberations. Will the committee decide to ponder the case longer, or will it come to a vote? Many say

that a decision is likely to be deferred, at least for a short period of discussion and consultation.

Individual decisions

Another possibility is that the two sides could agree to disagree, and give up the idea of drawing up an international convention. This means countries could decide for themselves how to regulate human cloning, as they do at the moment.

Even if the legal committee comes out in favour of a blanket ban, it would take several years to make this legally binding, if it were possible at all. The decision would have to be approved in the UN general assembly, and a convention drawn up and signed by enough countries to make it law.

And even then, it seems unlikely that countries such as Britain, which fund and support therapeutic cloning, would alter their research programmes. Some countries “would not stick to it”, says health policy specialist Harold Fruchtbaum of Columbia University, New York, who gives countries advice about cloning.

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