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UN delay: a boost for cloning advocates

By putting off a vote on banning all human cloning, nations have let embryo research for therapeutic reasons gain momentum.

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The world's foremost deliberative body still can't decide whether the cloning of human embryos to make stem cells is acceptable.

Despite pressure from the Bush administration for a total ban on human cloning, last Friday the United Nations deferred a decision on the subject for the second time in two years.

At issue: Whether to ban all human cloning or only efforts that would try to clone a human being. The distinction is important because laboratories in the United States and elsewhere are hard at work on so-called therapeutic cloning, in which stem cells are produced that might eventually lead to better understanding, if not treatment, of a number of diseases for which there is no present medical cure. The longer the UN puts off a decision, the more momentum such research efforts will get, observers say.

The delay marks a "tremendous victory," says Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute in Coral Gables, Fla., an advocacy group for stem-cell research. A number of southern African nations that had supported a total ban now have withdrawn their support, he points out. "They are ravaged with HIV/AIDS ... and there is promise for HIV/AIDS research through therapeutic cloning," Mr. Siegel says. In addition, Turkey has announced on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference that the 57-member group wants more time to consider the issue. "This marks a definite erosion of the US plan to ban therapeutic cloning," Siegel says.

With support from the United States, including an appeal from President Bush during his Sept. 21 address to the UN, Costa Rica had put forward a proposal

that would have established a total ban on human cloning.

But an up-or-down vote could still happen, says David Prentice, who follows the UN debate on behalf of the Family Research Council, which advocates a total cloning ban. If a vote does take place, "I think the Costa Rican proposal will probably pass," he says.

What the UN ultimately decides will be "very significant" because having a consistent policy on cloning is crucial, adds Kenneth Goodman, director of the bioethics program at the University of Miami. With some nations banning cloning and others not, "you are exporting and importing science based on political considerations in various countries," he says. "That's not the way the world's scientific community works at its best."

Deciding the issue via a UN debate, where it is subject to political pressures, he concedes, "is probably not the best way to resolve international health policy."

Many groups of scientists opposed the proposed UN ban on therapeutic cloning, from the American Society for Cell Biology to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the world's largest general scientific society. The Vatican, making its first speech ever to the UN General Assembly last week, backs a total ban on human cloning.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Thursday that he personally supported cloning to create human embryos for scientific research.

Even if the total ban were to pass later, it's uncertain how widely it would be ratified by individual countries, many of which already are moving ahead with stem-cell research. Last month, Britain granted a group of scientists at a university a first-ever license to begin therapeutic cloning efforts. In February, scientists in South Korea became the first to successfully clone human embryos. The team cultivated stem cells from the embryos after a few days and did not attempt to use them to clone a human being. South Korea has suggested that the UN delay its cloning vote until after a scientific conference can be held to further study the issue.

Opposition to reproductive cloning - using stem cells to create people - is nearly universal. Belgium has put forth a proposal to ban it while allowing cloning for scientific research.

"I think there is some urgency" to ban reproductive cloning, says Belgian envoy Marc Pecsteen. More crucial, he says, is not to pass a comprehensive ban, which he sees as "a failed instrument" at the outset. Last year, Belgium passed legislation that permits therapeutic cloning. He says his nation would have trouble reversing its position if the UN voted otherwise. "I don't think that we would go for it," he says.

But even if a vote for a total ban were not universally accepted, getting it through the UN would be worthwhile, Dr. Prentice says. "It's important that the

global community is on record saying, 'This is not what we consider a valid area to go into because of the question of human rights and human dignity' - even if that's just a symbolic gesture."

The UN is "just one battlefield" in the stem-cell war, Siegel says. In the US, some states are jousting to lead the way in research. In Massachusetts, a Harvard University stem-cell institute is awaiting approval from the university's ethical review board to clone its own stem cells. In California, a \$3 billion bond issue to underwrite such research is on the ballot.

Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry has campaigned as a strong advocate of therapeutic cloning. The Bush administration says it favors stem-cell research in general, but federal funds for embryonic stem-cell research have been restricted to only those lines that existed before August 2001.

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