

Published online: 22 November 2004; | doi:10.1038/news041122-2

UN ditches cloning ban

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Delegates opt for compromise statement.

Members of the United Nations last week abandoned the battle to outlaw human cloning and said they would settle for a non-binding declaration instead.

The move marks the end of a protracted, three-year debate in the United Nations about whether to draw up a treaty that would prohibit countries from cloning human embryos.

Since last year, the UN legal committee has been at loggerheads over two competing resolutions. One, proposed by Costa Rica and supported by the United States, calls for a blanket ban on reproductive cloning to make babies and therapeutic cloning for medical research.

The opposing resolution, proposed by Belgium, calls for a ban on reproductive cloning only. Those backing this proposal argue that cloning for research should be allowed because it could yield stem cells vital for curing disease.

Self regulation

On 19 November, the legal committee opted instead to draw up a weaker declaration, which will simply encourage countries to devise their own laws to regulate human cloning. Many countries have already done so.

The compromise proposal was put forward by Italy, which had previously backed the Costa Rican resolution. The country suggested an alternative option when it became clear that neither side had the necessary support to pass a vote.

The debate will not be completely over until the wording of the declaration, currently in draft form, is finalized to both sides' satisfaction; hence the language is likely to be vague. The legal committee has agreed to create a working group that will tweak the text in early 2005.

Advocates of therapeutic cloning say that the result is a setback for the Bush administration, which campaigned vigorously in favour of a broader ban. "Today marks another long-fought victory for stem-cell advocates," says Bernard Siegel of the Genetics Policy Institute, a Florida-based group that has lobbied for therapeutic cloning.

The rejection of a ban on cloning for research will be a "huge relief" for scientists, adds Kevin Wilson, director of public policy for the American Society for Cell Biology in Washington DC.



Countries will now simply be encouraged to devise their own laws to regulate human cloning.

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