

Genetic research faces new rules in Korea

December 22, 2004 — A broad set of rules governing genetic experimentation will be put into force starting in January, the cabinet decided yesterday.

The regulations passed by the National Assembly last December cover research employing stem cells, the primordial genetic material. Scientists are hopeful stem cells can be used to develop treatments for what are now incurable diseases, such as diabetes and cerebral palsy.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare said yesterday that the regulations and enforcement guidelines under the Bioethics and Biosafety Act will be implemented starting Jan. 1. Under the act, human cloning and cross-species experiments have been prohibited since January this year, after the original law was passed.

Beyond the initial prohibitions, the new rules provide guidelines for stem cell research and other genetic experiments that have been the subject of legal and ethical debates.

"Since July, we have tried our best to include opinions from researchers and civic groups in preparing the decrees," a Health Ministry medical policy official said yesterday.

Under the rules, scientists are allowed to conduct embryonic stem cell research for the purpose of curing 18 particular diseases, including diabetes, Alzheimer's, AIDS and cerebral palsy.

Referring to the work of Hwang Woo-suk, a leading geneticist at Seoul National University, a Health Ministry official said, "From now on, Professor Hwang will be able to obtain permission for his research plans quickly from the Health Ministry."

Mr. Hwang gained international recognition for his studies last year after he successfully extracted stem cells from cloned human embryos for the first time.

In October, Mr Hwang sought UN support for his research in a speech at the General Assembly. The rules provide for the establishment of an evaluation committee to review research plans involving what is called therapeutic cloning, meaning the development of tissue that can be used to address disease. Presidential approval is necessary for such projects.

The rules also eliminate the chance Mr. Hwang and other geneticists could face legal jeopardy. Researchers who have conducted experiments for three years or more, or scientists who have published in an academic journal, will be able to apply for separate permission from the health minister to carry out projects.

by Ser Myo-ja, Kim Chung-soo <myoja@joongang.co.kr>