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Time: 1:31 PM, Thursday, February 24, 2005

Culture

Effectiveness of UN Cloning Declaration in Dispute

By Patrick Goodenough

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February 24, 2005

(CNSNews.com) - A decision by a United Nations committee to recommend a global ban on all human cloning is making waves around the world, although some question whether it will have any real effect.

Should it be endorsed by the full General Assembly, the committee decision reached late last week would result only in a non-binding declaration, not a legally binding treaty.

Critics say the resolution, which was an attempt to find a compromise between bitterly divided members of the legal committee, is badly worded and ambiguous.

Some pro-life campaigners, however, regard it as an important victory.

U.N. member states have been divided on whether to ban cloning for whatever purpose, or to ban the practice only in cases where the end-result would be the birth of a cloned child - "reproductive" cloning.

Cloning involves the injecting of genetic material from a patient into an egg whose DNA has been removed. The resulting embryo will be a genetic copy of the patient.

The cloning debate is interwoven with the broader issue of stem cell research.

Supporters say stem cells harvested from early-stage human embryos hold the potential to develop cures for degenerative diseases. The controversy stems from the fact that the embryo is destroyed in the process.

Cloning embryos would provide scientists with stem cells for experimentation. Proponents label this "therapeutic cloning" on the grounds of the potential future medical benefits; pro-lifers call it "destructive," pointing to the resulting death of the embryo.

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Last Friday's decision came after years of often acrimonious debate, and the submission of rival proposals.

The one presented by Costa Rica, and backed by the U.S. and others, called for a total cloning ban.

Belgium's proposal sought to draw a distinction between cloning for different purposes, saying countries should be allowed to carry out what it called "therapeutic" cloning, with appropriate controls.

In a bid to break the impasse, Honduras introduced an alternative proposal, for a non-binding resolution. Even that failed to breach the gaps over language, the differences evident in the final vote tally of 71-35, with 43 countries abstaining.

The resolution calls on member states "to prohibit all forms of human cloning inasmuch as they are incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life."

It was immediately evident that the wording allowed for differing interpretations.

The U.S. representative said the declaration was an important step towards achieving a culture of life, adding that adding that the U.S. had always emphasized the incompatibility of all human cloning with human dignity and the sanctity and protection of human life.

But South Korea's delegate said that "human life" meant different things in different cultures and religions, and interpretation of the term should be left to each state.

A number of countries opposing the declaration, including Britain, China and South Korea, have made it clear they do not consider themselves bound by it and have no intention of stopping research underway.

Highlighting the problems with the wording, New Scientist magazine said that any government wanting to honor the U.N. declaration would first have to wrestle with the question, "What is incompatible with human dignity?"

The declaration was, it said, "woolly and open to interpretation."

Victory, but for whom?

Reflecting the ambiguity of the declaration, groups on both side of the debate have claimed success.

The Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute called the move "a monumental victory for the pro-life movement."

"This is a powerful message to the world that this morally questionable procedure is outside the bounds of acceptable experimentation," said the institute's president, Austin Ruse.

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He expressed the hope the vote would encourage bans in legislatures around the world including the U.S.

Cloning opponent Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kansas) also welcomed what he said was "a strong statement ... in support of protecting innocent human life and human dignity."

Brownback is soon to reintroduce legislation in the Senate to ban all human cloning.

But the U.N. committee vote was seen in a different light by the Genetics Policy Institute (GPI), a leading stem cell research proponent.

It said the fact the Costa Rica-U.S. proposal for a treaty banning all cloning had not succeeded was a "clear victory" for advocates, scientists and patients.

"GPI along with dozens of leading scientists from around the world are dedicated to blocking efforts to ban this research through U.N. action and will continue to urge policy leaders to learn about therapeutic cloning before enacting ill-advised bans," said the institute's executive director, Bernard Siegel.

Whether or not the GPI is right to celebrate, the declaration has alarmed some proponents of embryonic stem cell research.

The International Society for Stem Cell Research, a group with members in 27 countries, wrote immediately after the vote to all General Assembly member states, urging them to vote against the declaration when it is put before the 191-nation body.

In his letter, society president Leonard Zon expressed concern that the declaration would "fail to clearly distinguish the difference between unethical reproductive cloning and ethical and valuable therapeutic cloning."

The Royal Society, Britain's leading scientific academy, condemned the vote - but said it would make no practical difference.

The "ambiguous and badly-worded political declaration ... will have no effect on the use of therapeutic cloning in Britain," it said.

The British government recently gave Ian Wilmut, the scientist who created the first cloned mammal, Dolly the sheep, permission to create cloned embryos, using cells from people with motor neurone disease (also known as ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease), to harvest stem cells for research aimed at finding a cure.

Many pro-lifers point to research showing the potential benefits of "adult" stem cells, obtained from bone marrow, umbilical cords and other tissues, and say these could provide an ethical alternative to the destructive use of embryos.

Australian physician David van Gend of Do No Harm, a group

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supporting ethical medical research, argued that it was wrong to make reproductive-therapeutic distinction.

"Cloning is cloning no matter what you subsequently do with the cloned offspring," he said. "It is always the creation of an identical twin of the donor, which can either be born, or be experimented on.

"It is sociologically wrong to clone an embryo without biological parents, a mere creation of technicians, and let it be born as an absolute orphan," van Gend said.

"But it is morally sick to clone such an anonymous embryo, with no parents to defend its interests, simply to kill it for scientific research."

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