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UN divided on stem cell research

The United Nations debate over cloning came to a committee vote last month, but the result appears to have done little to resolve global differences over the ethics of stem cell research.

While a plurality of 71 nations in the UN's legal committee voted for banning all cloning, 35 members opposed the measure because it went beyond banning reproductive cloning—in which the intent is to create another human being—to also prohibit therapeutic cloning, which is done to create new lines of stem cells. Another 43 nations abstained from the committee vote altogether, meaning that the number who did not support the measure was larger than the number who did.

China, Japan and the United Kingdom were among those who opposed the resolution, while Italy, Germany and the United States were in the camp that voted in favor of the declaration.

Regardless of the final tally, it is questionable whether the resolution will hold much sway over individual countries as they decide whether scientists can pursue stem cell research and do somatic cell nuclear transfers, the technique that allows for stem cells and clones to be created. The measure still must go before the General Assembly, and even if passed then, it's only a recommendation—not a legally binding treaty.

Although some in the United States viewed the resolution as a clear endorsement for sweeping legislation banning all cloning, others here and abroad dismissed it as almost irrelevant. Britain's health minister was quoted in the *Scotsman* newspaper saying that his country remains "open for business" as far as stem cell research is concerned. And Bernard Siegel, executive director of the pro-stem-cell-research Genetics Policy Institute, remarked, "Whatever ultimately transpires in the UN on this declaration will not slow the advance of nuclear transfer research."



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