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UN abandons legal ban on human cloning

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NewScientist.com news service
Celeste Biever

The United Nations has given up its attempt to introduce a worldwide legal ban on some or all types of human cloning. On Tuesday its deeply divided general assembly voted to adopt a watered-down "declaration" that condemns all forms of human cloning but is not legally binding.

The declaration, which was passed by 84 votes to 34, with 37 abstentions, prohibits "all forms of human cloning inasmuch as they are incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life". But it has been widely criticised for being imprecise and meaningless.

"It lacks precision, it lacks clarity and it is certainly not a guide," says Bernard Siegel, head of the Genetic Policy Institute in Coral Gables, Florida, US, which has lobbied the UN in favour using human cloning to develop new medical therapies. "It masks the ultimate failure of the UN to produce a document with legal teeth."

The declaration follows four years of fruitless discussion, the postponement of several proposed blanket bans on all forms of human cloning and a decision to abandon a legally-binding ban in November 2004.

Cloned babies

The core of the issue was member states' inability to agree on whether a ban should cover just reproductive cloning - producing cloned babies - or therapeutic cloning as well. Both involve the creation of an early embryo by transferring the genetic material from the nucleus of a cell into an egg from which the nucleus has been removed.

Reproductive cloning is condemned by critics for ethical reasons and because of the predicted risks to the health of the clone. In contrast therapeutic cloning, where the embryo is only grown for a few days or weeks in order to harvest stem cells, is believed to have great medical potential. Cloned stem cells would not be rejected after implantation into the original donor.

However, for many people the destruction of an embryo for any scientific purpose is unacceptable. As a result 84 nations, including those like the US that wanted a ban on both types of cloning, voted in favour of the declaration.

"I applaud the strong vote of the United Nations General Assembly today," said US President George W Bush, in a statement released by the White House. "Human life must not be created for the purpose of destroying it."

Distressing diseases

But many industrialised nations, including the UK, France, Norway, Japan, China and South Korea, voted against the declaration because it does not explicitly allow therapeutic cloning.

"We regret that the UN seems unable to distinguish between these two very different forms of human cloning and has voted to ban research designed to find treatments for some of the world's most distressing diseases," says Arne Sunde of the University Hospital of Trondheim in Norway.

The UN declaration carries no legal clout, and so the countries that voted against the ban, as well as many scientists within the US who are working for privately funded institutes, will continue with their human cloning research. However, many scientists are frustrated because they had hoped that the UN would use its influence to ban reproductive cloning, which no nation advocates.

Emyr Jones Parry, the UK representative at the UN, blames the "intransigence" of some member states for this failure. And Siegel adds that the UN is unlikely to redress the issue.

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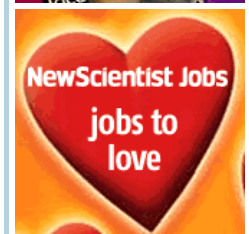
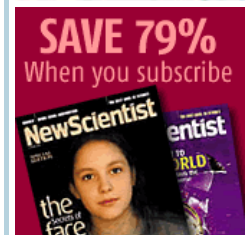
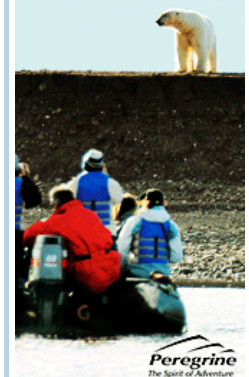
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