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Scientists Try to Trump Politics

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Scientists appearing Wednesday at a United Nations conference on stem cells and cloning hope to provide a scientific backdrop for a November vote on a cloning ban treaty.

U.N. delegates may already have their minds made up -- they've been through two votes on a cloning ban already, with a final vote set for November. But the Genetics Policy Institute, which is organizing the conference, hopes that a straightforward elucidation of cloning will lift the fog of politics from a science that many researchers believe could one day offer cures for diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

But a truly apolitical discussion isn't likely. In late 2003, Costa Rica led an effort to pass a complete cloning ban. The United Nations voted narrowly in December to postpone the decision for a year. Critics accused the United States of working with Costa Rica to take an argument the United States couldn't win nationally to an international forum. Cloning bills have languished in the U.S. Congress for several years because legislators can't agree on whether to ban all cloning or only reproductive cloning.

"The current administration can't get a law, so they want to go into the U.N., pushing Costa Rica in front of them, of course," said Lawrence Goldstein, professor of cellular and molecular medicine at the University of California at San Diego. "Does that seem bad or what?"

Goldstein will speak at the United Nations in New York on Wednesday along with other top stem-cell and cloning scientists, including Ian Wilmut, a professor at the Roslin Institute in Scotland and creator of Dolly the cloned sheep, and Dr. Woo Suk Hwang, the Korean scientist who was the first to extract stem cells from a cloned human embryo earlier this year. Christopher Reeve, who has been an outspoken proponent of embryonic stem-cell research since a horse-riding accident left him paralyzed from the neck down, will provide a taped introduction.

The conference organizers want to make it clear there are two kinds of cloning: reproductive, the type that would result in a baby, which almost everyone agrees should not be performed; and therapeutic, the type that researchers want to use to develop treatments for diseases.

"People need to know that therapeutic research, which is not reproductive cloning, will lead to breakthrough cures such as creating replacement tissue that the human body won't reject," said Bernard Siegel, director of the Genetics Policy Institute.

While no one's sure therapeutic cloning will lead to cures, research so far has been promising. If the work is made illegal, or if scientists can't get funding, they say they won't have the opportunity to continue trying.

Human dignity and the debate over when life begins are at the heart of the desire to ban all cloning. Therapeutic cloning, also called somatic cell nuclear transfer, uses a human embryo cloned from a patient to create cells that are a perfect immunological match. The embryo is destroyed when it develops into a blastocyst, a clump of several hundred cells that's about the size of the tip of a needle, in order to remove its stem cells. Researchers say these cells can become replacements for almost any type of cell in the human body.

The United Nations will provide international guidance on the issue when it finally votes on a ban in November. The United States currently has no cloning law, but New Jersey, California, Missouri and Rhode Island have passed state laws allowing therapeutic cloning. Some countries, like the Philippines and Canada, have outlawed all cloning. South Korea and Singapore encourage therapeutic cloning but outlaw reproductive cloning.

If a treaty banning all cloning passes in November, countries that allow cloning might find themselves in a confusing state of affairs.

"The important thing is this treaty is the type of treaty that would change national laws," said a U.N. treasury official who asked not to be named. "Some countries do not want to have a treaty that would take a different position to what their national laws already say. Of course, they don't have to join this treaty, but it puts them in the awkward position of not having a treaty that bans cloning."

While all U.N. delegates seem to agree that reproductive cloning should be banned, it's not likely all will be happy to stop there. Unless therapeutic cloning is banned explicitly, the treaty could appear to give it the go-ahead, the U.N. official said. But many scientists agree a reproductive cloning ban is better than having no regulation at all.

"We should do what we agree on and get over it," UC San Diego's Goldstein said.