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By Stephen Pincock

NEWS Stem cell law to be relaxed in Norway

Scientists hope the move, by one of Europe's strictest regulators of stem cell research, causes waves across the continent

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Norwegian scientists are this week celebrating a government plan to allow for the first time research on human embryonic stem cells, hoping the move will have positive repercussions in other European countries, particularly Germany.

On Friday (January 26), **the government** sent a proposed new law for parliamentary debate that would allow research on spare IVF embryos under strict legal and ethical controls. The government has a majority of 87 seats in the 169-seat parliament, and most observers expect the bill to pass within months.

"We're all very excited about this bill," said **Jan E. Brinchmann**, a stem cell researcher from Rikshospitalet University Hospital in Oslo. "We've been working on adult stem cells in Norway for some years, but without access to embryonic stem cells we've lacked a key tool."

The current Norwegian stem cell rules are among the most stringent in Europe. They bar the use of human fertilized eggs, embryonic stem cells and therapeutic cloning in research, and forbid scientists from importing embryonic stem cells from outside the country.

The new law limits scientists to using embryos up to 14 days after fertilization or thawing, and forbids the creation of embryos for research either by fertilization or therapeutic cloning. "We can live with that," said Brinchmann.

The new law was a victory for scientists, who had been lobbying the current and previous governments for years, said **Stefan Krauss**, director of the Norwegian Stem Cell Centre. He said scientists pushed hard for the government to make a priority of changing stem cell regulations. "This has been part of the first wave of new laws that the government is going to put into action, so we're quite pleased about that," Krauss said.

Scientists are likely to set up a collaborative embryonic stem cell lab as one of the first outcomes from the legal change, he said. That facility could act as a central repository for cells, run by a coalition of research groups.

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The new law could also have international effects, the scientists say. As Health and Care Services Minister Silvia Brustad pointed out when presenting the legislation on Friday, the law would bring Norway more into line with other European nations. Among the country's Scandinavian neighbors, for example, both Sweden and [Denmark](#) already allow embryonic stem cell work.

Scientists in the Nordic countries and beyond collaborate frequently through organizations like [ScanBalt](#) and NordForsk, so the Norwegian decision would allow its researchers to contribute more fully in regional initiatives, said Krauss.

International collaborations are vital for Scandinavian research teams, he said. "These are all small countries. We all realize that we need to cooperate in larger networks to spread knowledge and resources."

Jan Brinchmann agreed. "I should think we'll be working even more closely with the Swedes, for example," he added. "I imagine that will happen quite early in the process."

The ramifications of the decision could also have a political impact in other EU countries with strict rules, Krauss said. "For example, I think it will perhaps have an impact on Germany," he said. Under German law, researchers who collaborate with embryonic stem cell researchers overseas are potentially [breaking the law](#). "The fact that Scandinavia has a standard policy on this issue could influence [Germany's] very restrictive laws," Krauss said.

[Oliver Bruestle](#), from the Institute of Reconstructive Neurobiology at the University of Bonn, Germany, said he agrees. "The Norwegian situation could add to the pressure for change" in Germany, he told *The Scientist*.

The move leaves Germany increasingly isolated in its position, he said. "It is yet another indication that the European community appreciates the value of this technology, and is acting to encourage it...while we haven't even got moving."

[Juergen Hescheler](#), a stem cell researcher from the University of Cologne, said he was less hopeful the Norwegian example would have a political impact in Germany. "Of course, it would be good," Hescheler told *The Scientist*, "there are efforts from a several groups to make changes...but our research minister is very conservative."

Hescheler pointed out that Germany's policy prevents researchers using embryonic stem cells generated after 2002. This makes it hard for scientists to take part in EU-funded international collaborations. "With the current situation I'm skeptical whether German partners will be welcome to join research consortia because we're limited to using old cell lines," he said.

The Norwegian bill is expected to come into force in January 2008.

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Norwegian ministry of health

<http://www.odin.dep.no/hod/english/bn.html>

Jan Brinchmann

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