

Britain To Go Ahead With Human-Animal Embryos For Research

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The British government published its draft bill to overhaul the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act this week and it differs from the White Paper introduced late last year in that research using part human part animal embryos is to be allowed after all.

Some news reports are saying this is a major shift by government ministers after the angry reaction to the White Paper from scientists, MPs and patient groups that banning such research would impede medical breakthroughs.

A spokesperson denies this is a U-turn on the part of the government and that while the original stance had been one of prohibition, a door had been left open to allow such research on a case by case basis.

The government was criticized for its opposition to the research by a powerful lobby of scientists backed by Sir David King, the Chief Science Adviser to the government, the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust.

According to the Department of Health, the new bill, called the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill is intended to "ensure that the law remains effective and fit for purpose in the early 21st century and that it will take account of the latest scientific developments and changing public opinion".

The bill covers a number of areas, including research using three types of human-animal embryo:

- Cytoplasmic embryo or cybrid: where a human cell is inserted into an animal's egg that has been stripped of nearly all its nuclear DNA. The embryo would be 99.9 per cent human and 0.1 per cent animal.
- Human-animal chimera: where animal cells are introduced into human embryos.
- True human-animal hybrids: where a human egg is fertilized by animal sperm or vice versa.

The new bill will allow research to use cybrids and chimera, but not the true human-animal hybrids. If passed, the law will require all such embryos to be destroyed after 14 days; and under no circumstances would it be legal to implant them into a womb.

Two teams of UK scientists are already waiting to get the go ahead to use cybrids to produce embryonic stem cells so they can research new ways to treat a range of degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, motor neurone disease and Huntington's. Using cybrids would be much cheaper because animal eggs are easier to get hold of than human ones.

The other fertility and embryology areas covered by the new bill include proposals to:

- Allow children conceived from donors to find out if they have any siblings also conceived through donation, once they have reached the age of majority (18).
- Remove the need for the father to be considered in fertility treatment. This would mean for example that clinics would not be able to deny lesbians and single mothers fertility treatment on legal grounds.
- Deny parents the right to select the sex of their embryo for non-medical reasons.
- Extend the statutory embryo storage period to 10 years from the current 5.
- Give parental rights to civil partners.
- Introduce a cooling off period of up to one year if consent to store embryos is withdrawn by one of the parents.
- Allow embryos to be screened for serious medical conditions and tissue matching.
- Merge the current fertility watchdog, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority and the Human Tissue Authority into one regulatory body to be called the Regulatory Authority for Tissue and Embryos (RATE).

Scientists are still worried that the legislation will not reflect this new position on human animal embryos since it is not included in the bill itself but in a set of proposals to be considered alongside it. The draft bill is being reviewed by a committee that reports at the end of July after which it will be debated in parliament.

The committee will look into the question of whether the embryo research should be covered by statute or whether the new fertility watchdog should be given powers to issue licences on a case by case basis.

[Click here to access the new draft bill, the white paper and government reports covering human embryology developments since 2002 \(Department of Health, UK\).](#)

[Click here for a downloadable version of "Regenerative Medicine 2006", a report that describes advances in stem cell research since 2001 \(US Department of Health and Human Services, PDF reader required\).](#)

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