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Hybrid embryo research likely to be approved

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Research using hybrid embryos is likely to be given the go-ahead this week after warnings it would be a major blow to British science if the Government watchdog refused to allow it.

Researchers aim to create stem cells which can be manipulated in the laboratory to mimic human cells

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) will decide on Wednesday whether to permit scientists to create human-animal hybrid embryos to extract stem cells for research.

The studies could yield new treatments for diseases including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and motor neurone disease.

Early indications are that the HFEA will approve the concept in principle, but it still has to decide on two specific applications from university scientists - rulings which will come later this year.

Dr Stephen Minger, from King's College London, has applied to the HFEA to create embryos using eggs taken from cows which have had their genetic material removed and replaced with human cells.

The aim is to create stem cells which can be manipulated in the laboratory to mimic human cells with genetic neurological diseases so potential therapies can be developed.

The only other alternative, Dr Minger said, is to encourage thousands of women to donate their eggs for research. "Ruling against this research would be a real blow for science, not just stem cell research," he said.

"We thought that what we were doing was quite pragmatic. It is more justified than trying to encourage thousands of young women to come forward to undergo a fairly invasive procedure for research. In my opinion that is not realistic and not justified."

Another application has been submitted by Dr Lyle Armstrong and his team at Newcastle University to carry out basic research using stem cells taken from hybrid embryos.

Hybrids have already been created in China and if the HFEA rules in favour of the principle on Wednesday the two British applications will be put before its licence committee in November.

A row erupted last year after a Government White Paper proposed banning the technique following a backlash from a public consultation.

Scientists warned the consultation had been skewed by pro-life groups and so the HFEA carried out its own.

In the meantime, the Government has published a draft Bill which would allow hybrid embryos created using cloning techniques but not "true hybrids" where a human egg is fertilised with animal sperm or vice versa.

The joint scrutiny committee said this should be removed and research allowed on all hybrids.

Phil Willis, the Liberal Democrat MP for Harrogate and Knaresborough who is chairman of the committee, said it was likely the final Bill will be amended to reflect this before it went to MPs.

He said: "It would be fairly logical for the HFEA to go ahead and decide these licences."

The Government's chief medical officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, is a high-profile dissenter.

He has said that mixing human cells with animals cells should not be permitted and it has been suggested that if the research is allowed he may have to resign.

Mr Willis said: "Liam Donaldson has taken a very hard line on this. To have the CMO talking about 'yuk' factors is not acceptable."

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