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Stem cell scientists fear lost ground

Leigh Dayton, Science writer
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STEM cell scientists would be allowed to create inter-species embryos, under a draft bill released by the British Government.

- [Graphic: Playing God](#)

If the bill becomes law, Australian experts fear they will be disadvantaged and may press for changes to national legislation, which now outlaws creation of animal-human embryos for research.

Although the British bill would allow several types of animal-human hybrids, the most important to researchers are cytoplasmic hybrid embryos or "cybrids", which are created by inserting human DNA into an empty animal egg. Once the egg develops into an early-stage embryo, embryonic stem cells can be extracted.

Embryonic stem cells are seen as a powerful tool for teasing out the underlying mechanisms of serious diseases and for developing therapies.

"If this area of research proves fruitful, the ban on animal eggs is likely to be reconsidered in Australia when the federal legislation is reviewed again in three years, which is required by the amending legislation," said Loane Skene, deputy chair of the Lockhart Committee, which has recommended changes to Australia's 2002 embryo research and anti-cloning legislation to permit hybrids.

Professor Skene, an expert in medical law with the University of Melbourne, said it was possible to change the laws earlier if the federal Government was on side.

Such support is unlikely, given the intense opposition to hybrids from conservative politicians such as Health Minister Tony Abbott, as well as some religious thinkers.

"We have just had a long debate on this and the parliament has spoken," Mr Abbott said yesterday.

"I can't imagine this issue will be revisited any time soon."

During last year's debate about the Lockhart recommendations, fears were raised that permitting hybrids could lead to creatures such as "rabbit man".

At the time, experts including Ian Wilmut, the British scientist who cloned Dolly the sheep, debunked the claims as nonsensical and scientifically impossible.

According to Stephen Livesey, head of the Australian Stem Cell Centre in Melbourne, last year's amendments allowing scientists to use a controversial technique called somatic cell nuclear transfer, or therapeutic cloning, put them on an equal footing with their overseas counterparts.

But if cybrids were permitted in Britain, he said researchers there would once again have an enormous advantage.

"Since precious human eggs are not required, research can proceed more quickly," Dr Livesey said.

He noted that in both countries most human eggs were donated for infertility treatment.

The proposed amendments to Britain's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act are expected to be adopted.

If so, researchers would apply to the Regulatory Authority for Tissue and Embryos for permission to create hybrids.

Work would be tightly regulated and hybrids would be destroyed after 14 days.

The draft bill has been backed by leading research agencies, including the Medical Research Council and key funding agencies such as the independent Wellcome.

The draft bill reflects recommendations of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee.

Already two separate groups at Britain's Newcastle University and King's College London have applied to regulators for permission to create cybrids.

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