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UK backs human-animal embryo research

Leigh Dayton, Science writer | *September 07, 2007*

BRITISH stem cell scientists will be allowed to create inter-species embryos after Britain's regulator gave the go-ahead to plans to create the embryos under strict conditions.

The decision comes a year after lengthy discussions about Australia's embryo research and anti-cloning legislation, during which opponents of such research raised the spectre of "rabbit man" and Health Minister Tony Abbott warned about the dangers of creating a human-animal hybrid.

Such entities are currently outlawed under Australian law but scientists here now fear they will be disadvantaged.

As reported in The Australian in May, experts may press for changes to Australian embryo research and anti-cloning legislation when it is reviewed in three years, as required under amending laws passed last December.

Britain's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority decided yesterday to support draft legislation allowing researchers to apply for permits to create so-called "cytoplasmic" embryos, also known as "cybrids".

Cybrids 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 (ES) cells are seen as a powerful tool for determining the underlying mechanisms of serious disease and for developing therapies.

Cybrids are essentially an incubator for the development of ES cells, based on donated human skin or other easily acquired cells.

A spokeswoman for Mr Abbott said yesterday that as the commonwealth recently changed the legislation in relation to stem cell research, the minister did not believe further changes were required to the 2002 embryo and cloning legislation.

According to Stephen Livesey, head of the Australian Stem Cell Centre in Melbourne, the amendments approved last December put Australian scientists on an equal playing field with their overseas counterparts.

Those changes allowed them to use a controversial technique called somatic cell nuclear transfer, or therapeutic cloning.

But the ability to create cybrids will once again give British teams an enormous advantage. "Since precious human eggs are not required, research can proceed more quickly," Dr Livesey said.

Britain's HFEA conducted extensive public consultation and found that Britons were "at ease" with the procedure once the research implications were explained.

A spokeswoman for the HFEA accepted that some people disapproved on ethical or religious grounds. She said that made the authority's decision difficult to make.

"This is not a total green light for hybrid research, but recognition that this area of research can, with caution and careful scrutiny, be permitted," the spokeswoman said.

Additional reporting: AFP