

U.N. Backs Human Cloning Ban

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Wednesday, March 9, 2005; Page A15

UNITED NATIONS, March 8 -- The U.N. General Assembly adopted a declaration Tuesday that calls on governments to ban all forms of human cloning that are "incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life."

The U.S.-backed resolution, which passed by a vote of 84 to 34 with 37 abstentions, is not legally binding. The vote ended four years of highly contentious debate toward a legally binding treaty -- an effort that unraveled when the participants could not agree.

The dispute pitted the United States and conservative Catholic countries, which favor a total ban, against many European, Asian and other governments, which want a partial ban that would permit the cloning of human embryos for stem cell research. Virtually all U.N. members agree that the cloning of humans should be banned.

Sichan Siv, the U.S. delegate, welcomed the action by the 191-member General Assembly in a brief statement. He referred to a previous U.S. statement praising the declaration for opposing scientific efforts to "take advantage of some, vulnerable lives for the benefit of others."

Britain, Belgium, China and other countries that support "therapeutic cloning" -- the cloning of human embryos in medical research aimed at finding cures for diseases -- said they will not honor the declaration.

"The United Kingdom is a strong supporter of therapeutic cloning research because it has the potential to revolutionize medicine in this century in the way that antibiotics did in the last," said Emyr Jones Parry, Britain's U.N. ambassador.

Diplomats and experts on cloning said that the language in Tuesday's declaration was ambiguous and that its meaning would be disputed. For example, it is unclear whether therapeutic cloning is considered "incompatible with human dignity."

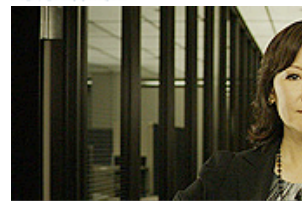
Still, a number of U.S. and European medical and scientific groups expressed dismay over Tuesday's vote, saying it could undercut medical research aimed at curing a host of diseases, including Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and diabetes.

The declaration could "halt or severely delay progress in the development of very important therapeutic treatments of major public health diseases," said Alan I. Leshner, chief executive of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

But those backing the total ban said Tuesday's action showed that support is growing.

"This declaration shows once and for all this is not all about the religious right," said William B. Hurlbut, a Stanford University ethicist who serves on President Bush's Council on Bioethics. "A decent society doesn't build the foundations of its biomedical science on the creation and destruction of human embryos."

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