

Pressure stepped up on embryo research

- Close result expected in Commons vote
- Undecided MPs heavily lobbied

London

As parliamentary lobbying to influence the House of Commons vote on human embryo research in Britain reaches a crescendo, the opposing sides agree on one thing alone — the result will be close.

On 23 April, Members of Parliament (MPs) vote on alternative versions of Clause 11 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, free from an official party line. One of these alternatives follows the recommendations of the 1984 Warnock Report, allowing carefully regulated research up to 14 days from conception. The other would make this research a criminal offence. The pro-research lobby, led by PROGRESS, an umbrella organization of charities, medical and scientific groups, argues that future developments in infertility treatment, contraception and the diagnosis and treatment of genetic disease would be prevented by a ban on research.

In the House of Lords, peers voted in favour of research by nearly three to one (see *Nature* 343, 577; 15 February 1990). But Christine Lavery, secretary of the Genetics Interest Group (GIG), representing a number of genetic disease charities, says that peers were better informed than most MPs. Professor Robert Winston, of Hammersmith Hospital, London, and president of PROGRESS (whose paper on embryo research is published on page 768 of this issue), echoes this view: "If Members of Parliament were fully educated", he says, "I can't believe they would vote against research".

Both the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Royal Society are taking the unusual step, for government-funded bodies, of contacting MPs to correct errors of scientific fact creeping into the debate. Professor Richard Gardner, chairman of the Royal Society's *ad hoc* committee on embryo research, is also worried by the assertion from many anti-research MPs and pressure groups that they are not against 'non-destructive research' (when embryos are placed back into the mother). Apart from scientific considerations, allowing embryos used in experimental procedures to go to full-term would be "grossly irresponsible", he says. With research at an early stage, the effects of some procedures on later development are not yet known.

For organizations involved in more overt lobbying of MPs, identifying those who have not yet made up their minds may be crucial, so that resources can be

focused in the run-up to the debate. Lavery says that GIG is concentrating on a "grey area" of about 75 MPs, while LIFE, a 'pro-life' group campaigning on the anti-research side, is targeting 250 MPs who did not attend the bill's second reading debate, earlier this month.

Both sides claim that opposing lobbyists have spent far more than themselves. Phyllis Bowman, of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC), largest group in the anti-research lobby, describes claims that her organization has channelled upwards of £250,000 into the campaign as "rubbish". SPUC's accounts are not yet available, she says, but adds that she has mortgaged her own home to help finance the campaign, and attacks the MRC's involvement as an abuse of public funds. Winston says that PROGRESS has been limited to a budget of £20,000 over three years.

The government is also under attack, for its handling of the bill. Peter Thurnham, a Conservative MP and member of PROGRESS, says that holding the debate on a Monday evening, shortly after the Easter recess, with many MPs still in their constituencies, may mean a low attendance. Although Thurnham is confident that a majority of MPs favour research, a low turnout could give a "maverick" result, he says.

Pro-research groups oppose the government's decision to allow a clause on abortion to be added to the bill (see *Nature* 344, 476; 5 April 1990). Deputy Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Howe's clause proposes a cut in the upper time limit for abortion from 28 to 24 weeks of pregnancy, and other MPs have tabled amendments that propose even lower time limits. Although the abortion clause will be discussed the following day (24 April), the fear is that the emotionally charged arguments of the abortion debate may spill over into the discussion of the embryo research clause, and cloud what should be a separate issue.

Opinion among the anti-research lobby on this question is divided. Bowman from SPUC agrees that the two issues would be better dealt with separately, but Nigel Williams from Christian Action, Research and Education (CARE) and Conservative MP Ann Widcombe both welcome the inclusion of a clause on late abortion in a government-sponsored bill.

The abortion and embryo research issues are already being linked together by some members of the anti-research lobby.

A pamphlet issued to other MPs by Sir Bernard Braine, a Conservative member, in response to an earlier PROGRESS document, claims that research to identify pre-implantation tests to screen for genetic diseases will mean "aborting those who suffer from genetic disease". Widcombe also rejects the separation of the two issues: "Pro-life MPs believe that life begins at conception", she says.

Widcombe's position is a simple one to understand. The problem faced by the pro-research lobbyists is explaining to MPs the more complicated concept that the beginning of the embryonic period proper is when the first cells which may form the embryo itself, rather than its supporting structures, can be identified, at 14–16 days from conception. Pro-research groups reject the use of the term 'pre-embryo', by PROGRESS and the MRC, to describe the embryo in the 14 days following conception. They say the term is deliberately misleading and Braine's pamphlet charges that the term 'embryo' has been shunned during lobbying, despite its use in a professional context by researchers. The MRC says it is standing by its use of 'pre-embryo', although Mary Rice, who is co-ordinating the MRC's campaign, acknowledges that the term has caused some confusion.

Thurnham believes that the most effective tactics for pro-research lobbyists may be simply to explain to MPs the medical benefits that are promised by embryo research.

If research is banned, some scientists predict an exodus of British researchers abroad, a fear first voiced by Sir George Porter, president of the Royal Society. But Jenny Gunning, who has compiled a report comparing embryo research internationally, disagrees. She predicts that most British researchers would not emigrate, but would choose to collaborate in projects where experiments can be carried out in other countries.

Winston also thinks a ban on research would not lead to the loss of many researchers from the United Kingdom. Embryo research is "a small, but important" part of his own group's work, and most researchers could occupy themselves in other areas, he says. Winston adds that the pro-research arguments should concentrate on future benefits to patients, not the effects of a ban on research on scientists.

Internationally, there is no consensus on the embryo research question. Belgium and the United States have no legal restrictions, although the US government gives no financial support for the work. Sweden allows research up to 14 days from conception, setting a precedent for the British pro-research lobbyists, but a bill banning research in West Germany is expected to become law in the summer.

Peter Aldhous