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European panel rejects creation of human embryos for research

David Dickson, London

The debate over whether scientists should be allowed to create human embryos for use in stem-cell research is set to take a dramatic twist this week. A report giving top-level advice to the European Commission will rule that approving such practices would be “premature”.

“The creation of embryos for the sole purpose of research raises serious concerns since it represents a further step in the instrumentalization of human life,” says the report. It goes on to describe the hopes of regenerative medicine as “still very speculative”.

Although aimed primarily at guiding the commission on decisions about its own Framework research programme, the judgment is expected to have a significant impact on those European Union member states, including France and Britain, that are currently debating the issue.

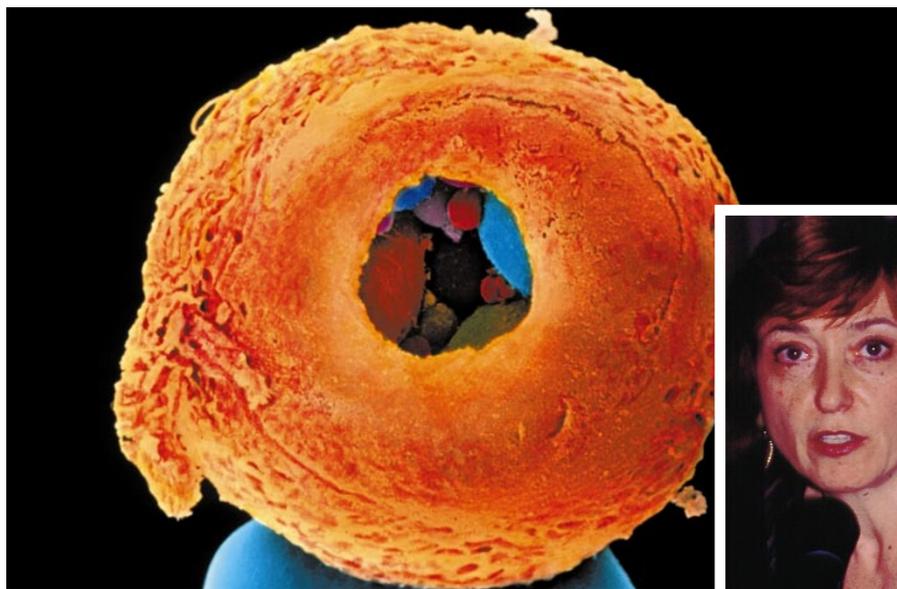
The report comes just days before the British parliament is likely to debate a recommendation from the government's chief medical officer, Liam Donaldson, that such research should be allowed to proceed (see *Nature* 406, 815; 2000).

In the United States, meanwhile, the National Institutes of Health's plan to allow research on stem cells — but not their extraction for that purpose — has been left hanging in the balance by the inconclusive results of last week's presidential election (see page 279).

The new report was prepared by the 12-member European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE), chaired by French high-court judge Nöelle Lenoir. It was due to be presented to the European Union's Council of Ministers this week.

Romano Prodi, president of the European Commission, requested the report to provide guidance on what has become a hot potato in Brussels. In September, the European Parliament narrowly approved a resolution declaring its opposition to the ‘therapeutic cloning’ of human embryos — which it said was no different from reproductive cloning — and demanding criminal penalties for any infringement.

Produced after a series of hearings with



Handle with care: Nöelle Lenoir's report recommends ‘prudence’ for stem cells.

scientific and religious witnesses, the EGE's report acknowledges both the “scientific justification” and the potential medical value of somatic-cell nuclear transfer. But it recommends “prudence” and a precautionary approach, concluding that “at present the creation of embryos for somatic cell transfer would be premature”.

Lenoir says that the conclusion represents a compromise between three different positions expressed on her committee: that all embryo research in member states should be outlawed (as it is in Germany, for example); that it should be permitted, but that the creation of embryos for research purposes should not be; and that the latter should be allowed under carefully regulated circumstances, as is being proposed in Britain.

She says that the panel's unanimous decision that allowing such research to proceed would be premature represents “a pragmatic approach” reflecting a need to find a consensus as a basis on which European research can be funded. Lenoir also emphasizes that the group did not want to cut off future options, and “is not trying to interfere in any way with national legislation”.

The British government's position has

already been complicated by the heavy defeat two weeks ago of a private member's bill supporting such research submitted by Evan Harris, Liberal Democrat member of parliament for Oxford, West. As they have done in the United States, opponents claimed that the creation of embryos for research purposes was unethical, and that therapeutic cloning is the first step on a slippery slope to reproductive cloning.

Some members of parliament are claiming that they voted against the bill primarily because of the strictly limited time for debate allowed on such private bills. And the scientific community has launched a vigorous lobbying effort, spearheaded by the Royal Society, to support the implementation of legislation allowing embryonic stem-cell research.

But other observers say that the heavy defeat of Harris's bill will have sent a warning to the government that the free vote it has promised on the issue could prove an embarrassing failure, particularly in a period prior to a general election. They add that delaying a vote until after the election could increase the chances that legislation permitting stem-cell research is approved. ■