

"Made in Britain, Born elsewhere"

The HFEA (Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority) and the HGAC (Human Genetics Advisory Commission) have recommended approval of human cloning for therapeutic purposes, but not to make baby clones. That is the conclusion of their controversial report for the UK government, published on 8 December 1998 - supported by more recent announcements.

Sir Colin Campbell, Chairman of the HGAC said then "New treatments might be developed for diseased or damaged tissue. This would entail growing cells or tissues in culture and not involve human reproductive cloning. It would not be right at this stage to rule out using such techniques, which could be of benefit to seriously ill people". But the technology is identical - make a cloned embryo and implant it or cannibalise it for embryonic stem cells.

So it could have been full speed ahead for British scientists who can start human cloning with official backing - so long as the clones they make are destroyed to make human tissue factories, and not implanted into the womb.

However the government threw out the recommendations, ended the original advisory panels and set up a completely new process, scared perhaps of public reaction. The new committee came to the same conclusions by August 2000. The next step would be a Parliamentary debate in Autumn 2000.

If Parliament approves, it will be a huge gift for people like Dr Richard Seed, who can now hope to sit back and relax while big business and government funds research to perfect the basic cloning technique. Once that's done, the baby cloners will step in, take the technology and use it.

Therefore I predict that if "therapeutic" cloning is approved, as a direct result, human clones could be made in Britain or using British technology, but will be born elsewhere.

The various committees have ridden over the wishes of the general public who have shown

themselves to be very uneasy not only about the birth of human clones but also the use of cloning to make tissues for spare tissue factories. I took part recently in a one hour TV debate on both reproductive and therapeutic cloning. At the end, the studio was hit with 5,500 calls in three minutes from voters. 88% voted against both reproductive and therapeutic options. Other surveys have found similar unease. It's not that people are using language such as "morally wrong" but they just feel uncomfortable, perhaps one step too far.

1000 word feature on the 1998 original HFEA decision

Big business interests are at stake. The press conference by HFEA was held at the Department of Trade and Industry. The timing was brought forward after pressure from biotech companies who wanted a quick answer about the go-ahead. When Dolly the sheep was cloned the shares of PPL Therapeutics rose by \$60 million. Dr Richard Seed has already raised \$15 million to clone human babies.

What HFEA and other committees could and should have said:

1. Total ban on birth of human clones and associated techniques - with urgent action to get international agreement on this through a Biotech summit.
2. Moratorium on all human cloning research pending further debate, even where the aim is destroying the pre-implantation embryo in order to cultivate tissues for medical purposes.

The very fact that there has been SO much intense media debate (see below) in the hours before and after the announcement shows that the debate is ongoing. The British people have NOT made up their minds. The consultation process is NOT complete. Indeed it has hardly begun. The HFEA / HGAC based their entire conclusions on a mere 200 submissions - hardly a national consensus. We cannot go ahead with confidence. Now is a time for further discussion, involving far more lay people. The HFEA is dominated by those in the industry or those associated with it, and the HGAC is the same. The British government must not allow itself to be stampeded into premature approval.