

John Martin reports on disquiet about the way evidence put before the House of Lords' Select Committee on Stem Cells was stage managed

# Stem Cell Stitch Up

## Pro-Life voices claim they were silenced

**T**he religious press predictably headlined it 'Church backs cloning decision'<sup>1</sup> but the reality is more complex than that. What the headline boils down to is that the Board for Social Responsibility (BSR) of the Church of England threw its weight behind the recommendations of the House of Lords' Select Committee on Stem Cells. The BSR is mandated to advise the Church on matters of public policy. But there are thousands of Anglican churchgoers who have never even heard of the BSR and would not feel themselves bound one way or the other by its views. But this is just one small part of what looks very much like a 'stitch-up'. The Select Committee, chaired by the Bishop of Oxford, the Rt Rev Richard Harries, silenced voices that believed that stem cell research on human embryos was unethical and dismissed without giving a hearing voices wishing to put the case for an alternative - adult stem cell research.

The Committee's remit was to 'examine the ethical, legal, scientific, medical and commercial issues surrounding the Regulations as they stand'. There was a mountain of written evidence. The Committee heard addresses from over 43 persons with oral evidence from ethical, scientific and medical perspectives and the BioIndustry Association, but according to Pro-Life activists scientists who hold that adult stem cell research is superior to research on embryos were excluded and did not get a hearing. Pro-Life agencies also criticised what they see as failure to take into account legal issues raised by the recent Judicial Review sponsored by the Pro-Life Alliance.

The critics also pointed out an imbalance of representation of religious communities in the oral evidence. Only Church of England voices were heard from the Christian community. They claim that Muslim input was 'minimal' while no witnesses were called on behalf of the Sikhs and Hindus.

Lord Alton of Liverpool described the Committee's findings as 'disappointingly predictable, bereft of any new insights, ethically compromised, and already eclipsed by exciting new scientific developments in adult stem cells research'.<sup>2</sup>

He said the inquiry had been 'one-sided'. The appointment of a senior cleric (the Bishop of Oxford) to chair the enquiry had added to 'the general sense of cynicism' and was designed 'to give a cloak of respectability to a process that diminishes humanity and wantonly destroys life'.

He was critical, too, of the way scientific evidence was marshalled. 'The further appointment of an "impartial" scientific adviser to the Committee, who is himself a leading protagonist and practitioner, adds general contempt and cynicism about this risible process.'

The Committee, he said, had not only failed to give proper

consideration to the case for adult stem cell research. It had 'failed to investigate the significant commercial interests driving the cloning agenda'.

Lord Alton said that Britain would now 'need to look to Europe and the USA to uphold the sanctity of human life and to demonstrate that the pursuit of scientific excellence does not have to involve the destruction of early human life'.

If Pro-Life campaigners are right and the selection of who would supply oral evidence to the Committee was relentlessly weighted towards those who argue for the benefits of cell nuclear replacement and embryonic stem cell replacement (CNR), stem cell research has a serious credibility problem. Such a stitch-up does no good for Parliament in a climate where more and more people are cynical about its relevance.

There are reputable scientific journals who at least voice disquiet about CNR. Meanwhile advances are taking place all the time in adult stem cell research. We have to hope and pray that truth will out.

### Christian divisions

This turn of events makes absolutely clear what has been known for some time. There is a gulf between the Pro Life Movement and the Church of England (at least the Board for Social Responsibility at Church House and the Bishops in the House of Lords for whom it acts as a Civil Service). There is fault on both sides and the situation has not been helped by divisions among Pro-Lifers and the extreme tactics used by some of their allies in the USA.

More importantly it indicates a serious division between Anglicans and the Catholic Church over what is a defining issue in moral theology. As reported in the last issue of *Triple Helix*<sup>3</sup> a heavyweight brigade of theologians and ethicists, many of them Catholics, reject the arguments marshalled by the Bishop of Oxford in support of the use of embryos in stem cell research.

Indeed but for the interventions of the Catholic Church, in particular by Pope John-Paul II, few members of the general public would even have been aware of adult stem cell research as an option. So what price ecumenical advance now?

*John Martin is Associate Editor of Triple Helix*

### References

1. *Church of England Newspaper*, 8 March, 2002.
2. Statement issued 27 February 2002.
3. Martin J. Cloning advocate under heavy fire. *Triple Helix* 2002; Winter:5,6