

The HFE Bill

A farcical footnote in history?



Press conference outside No. 10 Downing Street

So what has all the hype been about?

references

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As *Triple Helix* went to press the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill was entering its final Parliamentary stages. We have consistently argued that the proposals for animal-human hybrids, saviour siblings and removing the need for a father for IVF children threaten individual, family and societal life more than any other legislation for decades.¹ As well as being unethical this legislation is also unnecessary, because ethical alternatives to its proposals already exist.

However, the government has been determined to get it through and so far all amendments have failed. In the Lords a powerful lobby of medical peers and institutions like the Royal Society and Medical Research Council backed it and the government whip required peers to support every aspect. In the Commons a conscience vote was allowed on the three most controversial issues (hybrids, saviours, and fathers) following protests from the Catholic Church and Catholic government MPs. Consequently, MPs debated the issues rather than consigning them to a small committee, as is usual practice.

The day before, the Prime Minister made an impassioned personal appeal in the *Observer* for allowing animal-human hybrids, saying they would lead to cures for 'millions' of people. Although lip service was given to conscience, a three line whip on attendance ensured that all amendments attempting to ban hybrids and saviour siblings were heavily defeated.

The Bill has since spent four days in 'Public Bill Committee' with discussion about 'less controversial matters' like three parent embryos; artificial gametes; repeal of the Reproductive Cloning Act (which made the practice a criminal offence); and the use of tissue from children and mentally incapacitated and dead people to make hybrids. It now proceeds to Report and Third Reading, where government MPs, some of whom oppose embryo research *per se*, will be required to vote it through. Thereafter there will be a brief return to the Lords before Royal Assent.

Previous articles in *Triple Helix*,^{2,3} and extensive resources on our website,⁴ have tackled the bill in more detail but what will its ultimate impact be? During discussion in the Lords the new development of 'induced pluripotent stem cells' or ips, which could well make embryonic stem cell research redundant, was being announced.⁵ Even before the HFEA had granted licences for London and Newcastle bids for animal-human hybrids, the Medical Research Council was offering £600,000 in grants and calling

IPs 'a major breakthrough in stem cell research'.⁶ This March the US National Institute of Health counted 1,987 clinical trials using adult stem cells, 106 using cord blood stem cells and none using embryonic stem cells.⁷ Adult stem cell therapies are now used in over 70 diseases; cord blood cells in over 40; whilst embryonic stem cells treat none.

The morning after the vote, *Times* science correspondent Mark Henderson, who had campaigned vigorously for 'cybrids' and ridiculed religious leaders' objections, was far more cautious: 'Admixed embryos... are not going to lead to immediate medical breakthroughs... Any insights that they might offer into diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, too, are probably years away...' but 'they could be used to investigate how [diabetes and motor neuron disease] progress, and to develop and test new drugs'.⁸

Prior to the vote, Professor Peter Braude, who chaired the RCOG committee on cord blood,⁹ said in his view there would be no need for 'saviour siblings' in a few short years because of advances with cord blood and adult stem cell technology. Scientist Stephen Minger, who had fought so hard for his licence to make 'cybrids' before the Bill was passed because the need was so urgent, informed me he hadn't yet 'got the kit' and that starting the work would be months off.

Thus far no one anywhere has produced an embryonic line from a cloned human embryo, and the much-trumpeted work by Sheng, who claimed to have produced embryonic stem cells from 'cybrids' five years ago in Shanghai,¹⁰ has never been repeated.

So what has all the hype been about? A few scientists have become household names. A Prime Minister's reputation has had a temporary reprieve. No doubt there will be now be many attempts to produce stem cells from animal-human hybrids, whilst resources are diverted away from the more profitable areas of adult and cord blood stem cell research. But is this just Emperor's new clothes technology? My suspicion is that 'cybrids' (or 'admixed human embryos' as they are euphemistically called), like saviour siblings, will in a few short years become simply a farcical footnote in the history of science and a powerful testimony to the gullibility of patients and politicians driven to grasping at straws by what the Bible calls 'the fear of death'.¹¹ For my own part, I am looking to ethical research for cures for degenerative disease, and beyond that to the resurrection.

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