

British panel to debate hybrid embryo fate

January 10 2007

The position of Britain as a stem cell research leader could be at risk as scientists await action that may override a proposed ban on hybrid embryos.

The Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority was to debate Wednesday whether to allow animal eggs be used to produce cloned human embryos to counter a shortage of human eggs, the Financial Times said.

Researchers became alarmed when they noticed in a white paper on fertility a government proposal to ban the creation of hybrid human-animal embryos.

The process transfers the nucleus from a mature human cell to a rabbit or cow egg without a nucleus, then stimulates the cloned egg to grow into an early embryo, or blastocyst, from which stem cells could be cultured. Genetically it would be more than 99.9 percent human.

BioIndustry Association chairman Simon Best said a ban would hurt the industry as well as academic research, even though no British biotechnology company planned to work with hybrid embryos soon.

The panel's action comes as the Democrat-controlled U.S. Congress attempts to remove Bush administration restrictions on federal funding of embryonic stem cell research.

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Citation: British panel to debate hybrid embryo fate (2007, January 10) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-01-british-panel-debate-hybrid-embryo.html>

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