



Human Genetics Alert Press Conference: Stop GM Human Embryos!

Statement of Dr Richard Nicholson, Editor of the Bulletin of Medical Ethics

1. Legal issues

Because of its eugenic implications, human genetic modification (HGM) has been treated in international law very similarly to human reproductive cloning. Most industrialised countries have banned it, especially in Europe. Every country that has legislated on this subject has banned it. Thus the British government's decision breaks ranks with the international community, and may lead to the perception that Britain is a haven for irresponsible and profit-driven scientists.

The following countries have banned HGM: Australia (law), Austria (law, implicitly), Belgium (law), Brazil (law), Canada (law), China (guidelines), Denmark (law), France (law), Finland (law), Germany (law), India (guidelines), Israel (moratorium by law), Italy (law), Japan (law), Mexico (law, implicit), The Netherlands (law), Norway (law), South Africa (law), South Korea (law), Singapore (guidelines), Spain (law), and Switzerland (law). The Council of Europe Convention on Biomedicine and Human Rights also bans HGM, as well as a number of other abuses of genetic technologies, such as genetic discrimination by insurance companies, reproductive cloning and sex selection. Unfortunately, Britain has never signed the Convention. The reason for this is unclear, but seems to be a desire by HM Government to minimise controls on medical researchers, because their discoveries may be of economic value to the country. The failure to sign leaves Britain increasingly isolated from the European ethical standard.

It should be noted that these bans are for ethical and social reasons, rather than because the technology is currently unsafe. The indefinite bans imposed by the Convention, and by other countries, show that HGM is regarded in most countries as simply unacceptable.

In accordance with the Convention, the EU has, in its last two Framework (research funding) Programmes, excluded research aimed at genetic modification of human embryos from being funded. The EU has also excluded any methods for genetic modification of human embryos or human cloning from patentability, as being unethical, in its Directive on the Protection of Biotechnological Inventions (1998).

2. Issues of justice

The urge to do research involving HGM shows how much medical research in the UK is moving ever farther away from dealing with the major killing diseases. It is over a decade since the World Health Organisation described the 10/90 rule: that at least 90% of medical research worldwide is done on just 10% of the global disease burden. This research is unlikely ever to make much difference to the infections and infestations that still kill over 10 million every year, but largely out of sight in less developed countries. The almost complete failure of gene therapy after the incredibly optimistic publicity of the 1980s also shows how the research effort often provides much less value than the public are led to believe. The steady relaxation of one ethical constraint after another in UK research has produced little of value, while contributing to a growing public mistrust of medical research. Those who fund or undertake research in the UK need to remember that research considered by many to be unethical has never led to any major advance in healthcare.