

Cloning Debate Splits Women's Health Movement

By Allison Stevens

WASHINGTON—Women's health groups are at odds over a proposed bill that bans human cloning for reproductive and research purposes. There is broad support among women's groups for banning anyone from creating embryos with the intent of implanting them in women to produce children. But some women's health groups are crying foul because such a ban will also ban embryonic stem cell research, which would interfere with the promise of scientific breakthroughs that could be advantageous to women. Others believe such legislation, moreover, could threaten reproductive freedom

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Some Senate leaders expect to vote on the bill this summer. President George Bush, who supports a total ban on human cloning, has indicated he would sign the bill into law. The Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed a similar bill last year.

Heart of the Debate

Stem cells, sometimes called "magic seeds" for their ability to replicate indefinitely and morph into any kind of tissue, are taken from human embryos only days old. Because stem cells are capable of developing into any of nearly 220 cell types that make up the human body, scientists believe they will lead to cures for diseases once thought untreatable. The controversy begins at the source—the human embryos that must be destroyed to retrieve stem cells. Scientists can obtain these embryos in four ways: (1) from thousands of frozen embryos stored in fertility clinics (because clinics routinely fuse many eggs with sperm for in-vitro fertilisation); (2) from the fe-

tuses donated to abortion clinics; (3) from cloned human embryos; and (4) from mixed sperm and eggs expressly used to create embryos for stem cells. —Editor

Advocates of stem cell research—also called therapeutic cloning—believe this could lead to advances in the fight against diseases of particular concern to women such as breast and ovarian cancer, osteoporosis, arthritis and auto-immune diseases. The process could also advance research for diseases that affect the population at large such as Parkinson's Disease, stroke, heart disease, Lou Gehrig's Disease and various cancers.

Other women's groups are moreover wary of a bill backed by anti-abortion leaders. A total ban effectively endorses the pro-choice movement's demand of protection of the embryo from the moment of conception.

Supporters of the proposed total ban, however, say this will protect women from the dangers of an unregulated industry.

And still others say that cloning and abortion rights, however, are entirely unrelated issues. They believe a total ban will not jeopardise abortion rights and will also protect women from the potential dangers of a new technology not fully understood by scientists, doctors or politicians.

“Everything relating to abortion and embryos splits the women’s health community,” says Susan M. Wolf, a professor of law and medicine at the University of Minnesota Law School and editor of the book *Feminism in Bioethics: Beyond Reproduction*.

Opposition to Therapeutic Cloning

“Women’s health advocates have worked for years to overcome researchers’ past neglect of women’s health,” three women’s health groups wrote last May 2002 in a letter to Sen. Ted Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat and champion of the movement to legalise research on cloned embryonic stem cells.

“In our pursuit of better information, treatment and cures for women and their families, we must ensure that the newest and most promising techniques are available to those same researchers,” the National Partnership for Women and Families, the Society for Women’s Health Research and The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists said in their joint letter.



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Such groups, however, face serious obstacles in Congress, where a coalition of anti-abortion and anti-cloning members oppose therapeutic cloning because it would create human embryos with the specific intent of destroying them. They also fear that the misuse of embryonic stem cells by some scientists.

Women’s health groups also face obstacles within their own community from advocates who say allowing scientists to move forward with therapeutic cloning would endanger the lives of women.

Sen. Mary Landrieu, a pro-choice Democrat from Louisiana, is the only Democrat who publicly supports the Brownback bill. She said she supports a total ban on human cloning in part because she fears the process could lead to what she calls “the commodification of women’s bodies.” The demand for women’s eggs, she said, could create “an unseemly

market” where low-income women could be pressured to allow the harvesting and sale of their eggs.

Susan Yanow, director of the Abortion Access Project, shared Landrieu’s concern. “From a feminist perspective and a reproductive-rights perspective, one of the things I’m very concerned about is . . . that our women’s bodies are for sale,” she said, adding, “What does it mean for reproductive rights if women are reduced to incubators?”

Another women’s health group, the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, has called for a five-year moratorium on therapeutic cloning. The moratorium would allow time for a full-fledged public policy debate to take place and stricter federal regulations to be implemented before a “Pandora’s box” of health problems is opened, according to executive director Judy Norsigian, co-author of *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century*.

Health Concerns

Norsigian worries that scientists, in their zeal to collect large quantities of fertilised eggs, will rely on a drug called Lupron, which stimulates the ovaries, causing women to produce about 12 eggs each month rather than just one. The financial incentives to produce large quantities of eggs may encourage low-income women to take Lupron, which, she said, has not been proven to be a safe drug and is not approved by the Federal Drug Administration. She also said she has concerns about possible surgical operations involved in the collection of large quantities of eggs.

"Here we are with potentially thousands of eggs to be gathered with potentially dangerous drugs to be used," Norsigian said. "It may be four or five years before we resolve the question of this drug's safety."

Other women's health advocates, however, consider a five-year moratorium on therapeutic cloning unnecessary and even disingenuous because they say it effectively prohibits the practice permanently. Indeed, if the Senate passes the ban on human cloning and the president signs it into law, therapeutic cloning will carry a fine of up to US\$1 million and a 10-year prison sentence.

Legalising and funding therapeutic cloning will safeguard women's health because it leads to stricter government regulations and oversight, said Phyllis Greenberger, president of the Society for Women's Health Research. She added that outlawing the practice would have financially disas-

trous consequences because it would lead to a so-called brain drain: Talented scientists, she said, would move to European countries such as England and Italy, where such research is flourishing.

Greenberger also called the argument against the commodification of women's bodies "a joke." Low-income women, she said, have not been compelled to sell their bodies even though there is an existing demand for surrogate mothers and organ donors.

"It's a very paternalistic viewpoint that some women aren't going to have control over their bodies or aren't going to make decisions for themselves," she said, adding, "Do we not have minds of our own?"

Staying Neutral

Some experts are also saying a ban on human cloning could chip away at the reproductive-rights movement. They note that voting for a bill that protects a human embryo from the moment of conception could set a dangerous precedent for future votes on abortion rights.

The country's most prominent reproductive rights groups—the National Organization for Women, the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League and Planned Parenthood—have remained neutral on the issue, suggesting that they do not see the bill as a threat.

Others say the silence of these prominent organisations speaks volumes. They say women's groups in favour of therapeutic cloning hope to

keep the polarising issue of abortion out of the debate in order to allow anti-abortion politicians to side with embryonic stem cell research.

"Certainly, the anti-choice organisations and activists have taken this on as a primary issue," Susannah Baruch, director of health policy at the National Partnership for Women and Families, said when asked why a number of outspoken feminist groups have shied away from the issue. "So I think you have to draw your own conclusion from that."

Their strategy seems to be working. In a surprise move last month, anti-abortion Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah parted with the majority of his GOP Senate colleagues to join Kennedy in his appeal to legalise therapeutic cloning.

"I come to this issue with a strong pro-life, pro-family record," Hatch said in a release at the time of his decision. "But I also strongly believe that a critical part of being pro-life is to support measures that help the living."

Allison Stevens covers politics in Washington.

For more information:
Society for Women's Health Research: <http://www.womens-health.org/>
Boston Women's Health Book Collective: <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/>
National Partnership for Women and Families: <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/>

Source: Women's Enews, <http://www.womensenews.org>, 9 June 2002