

AMRC Statement on Human Embryo & Stem Cell Research

The Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) supported the continuation of research on human embryos which was enabled in the UK in January 2001 by the extension of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. Many patients suffering from serious diseases, and infertile patients, could potentially benefit from this carefully regulated research. The legislation previously permitted research only on the specifically identified areas of fertility, contraception, congenital diseases and prenatal diagnosis. AMRC supported the Donaldson Report's recommendation that the legislation should now be amended to permit research into human embryos and to allow that knowledge to be used to develop treatments for serious disease, such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, Parkinson's disease, stroke, arthritis and mental health.

The aim of medical research is to relieve suffering and improve the quality of life for people suffering ill health, many of whom will die prematurely. AMRC and its member organisations recognise there are important ethical issues that must be taken into account when considering research on human embryos, and cells derived from human embryos. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) and the Human Genetics Advisory Commission have conducted wide public consultations on these issues which have now been considered by the Expert Group chaired by the Chief Medical Officer. Appropriate safeguards and limitations are extremely important and AMRC is pleased to see that these are included in the Government's proposed legislation which also builds on the role of HFEA. HFEA has effectively regulated research on human embryos in the UK for ten years and AMRC considers it has been a leading global example of the way differences of view can be taken into account without creating unnecessary limitations to promising lines of research. The AMRC supports the Government's proposals for providing the strict and rigorous regulatory framework in which medical researchers can carry out their work. AMRC also supports the proposal to strengthen the prohibition on human cloning. Research of this kind is already being undertaken in the US and elsewhere in the world and AMRC considers it is important that the UK should also be involved.

In the longer term it is believed that stem cell research will lead to the development of many new treatments for a wide range of diseases. There is a very long way to go in the research before treatments will be available. For now, scientists will focus on developing the research to increase our understanding of how embryonic stem cells can be used to heal damaged or diseased tissue. AMRC supports the continued investigation of adult stem cells in parallel with embryonic stem cells. AMRC takes very seriously the ethical issues involved and believes it is important that there is continuing open and informed public debate about this area of research. AMRC remains absolutely opposed to human reproductive cloning, which is now prohibited through the Human Reproductive Cloning Act 2001.

AMRC also supports proposals to strengthen an international prohibition on human cloning. A 2003 opinion poll showed that around 70% of the British public support the use of human embryos for medical research to find treatments for serious diseases and for fertility research. More details are at www.mori.com/polls/2003/amrc.shtml

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