

Commons votes for human embryo stem cell research

Susan Mayor *London*

British MPs have backed proposals to permit research with human embryonic stem cells. Under current regulations, embryos up to 14 days old can be used for some specific research purposes, to treat infertility, and in the diagnosis of genetic and chromosomal disorders.

Under the new draft regulation, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, which regulates this area, would be able to license a wider range of research to explore the therapeutic potential of stem cells in the treatment of several disorders, such as Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease.

Two thirds of MPs voted to adopt recommendations made in a report by Liam Donaldson,

the chief medical officer. The public health minister Yvette Cooper said that the new research could hold "the key to healing within the human body" and offer hope to people with degenerative diseases. Adult stem cells do not yet offer an alternative to research with embryonic stem cells, because stem cells from embryos can differentiate into a wide range of cells or tissues. "Therein lies their power," Ms Cooper said. "For diseases where tissues will not repair on their own, stem cells may be the only thing on the horizon that holds out any hope."

A wide range of organisations that support patients with chronic diseases, including the Parkinson's Disease Society,

Diabetes UK, the Alzheimer's Society, and the Huntington's Disease Association, favour changing the regulations on using embryonic stem cells in research. The British Heart Foundation and the Cancer Research Campaign also support the new regulations, as do medical and scientific associations including the BMA and the Royal Society.

However, other organisations fear that the new regulations might open the way to human cloning. Peter Garrett, research director at the antiabortion charity Life, said, "Once you open the floodgates on the production of human cloned embryos, you are setting up the preconditions for full pregnancy cloning. My view is

that we are only a couple of years away from cloning human beings."

Shadow health secretary Liam Fox said that he was morally against the use of cells from embryos and had not been convinced that there was no alternative. It was unrealistic to think, he said, that such research could be halted, and so tough rules were needed to set the moral boundaries. "Just because we can do something does not mean we have to. We need to establish a clear framework within which to operate." □

The text of the parliamentary debate can be found at www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200001/cmhansrd/cm001219/debtext/01219-07.htm.

MEPs back tougher health warnings on cigarette packets

Rory Watson *Brussels*

European Union governments and members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are at loggerheads over a new range of health warnings which tobacco companies should be legally required to display on cigarette packets. The parliament last month approved over 30 changes to draft legislation on health warnings to try to increase their impact.

The most significant changes would require packets to carry graphic photographs of blackened lungs and rotten teeth and ban the use of terms like "low tar," "light," and "mild." They would increase the size of the warning labels by requiring up to 40% of the front and 50% of the back of each packet to be used for this purpose. The MEPs opted for new messages to be

included, such as "Passive smoking harms those around you, especially children"; "Smoking kills half a million people each year in the European Union"; and "Smoking causes cancer and heart disease."

They hope these will discourage the hundreds of people who start the habit each day. In addition, the draft legislation would reduce the maximum tar content per cigarette from 12 mg to 10 mg, cut nicotine levels to 1 mg, and introduce a 10 mg limit on carbon monoxide content for the first time. The amendments went considerably further than most governments of European Union states, which share legislative powers with the European parliament in this area, are prepared to go. Member

states want to increase the size of existing health warnings, but not to the extent demanded by MEPs. Nor do they support the idea of graphic photographs, which were recently pioneered in Canada.

When EU health ministers examined the revised legislation 24 hours later, they made clear they were not prepared to accept almost a third of the amendments, although they did not specify which ones. That will become clear in the next few months, when health ministers agree on their own amendments to the planned EU measures. Before the proposal can become law the two institutions will become involved in some hard bargaining to try to reconcile their differences. If they fail, the draft legislation will fall. Meanwhile, the public health commissioner, David Byrne, confirmed that within a couple of months he would be presenting a new proposal to ban all tobacco advertising and sponsorship in the EU. This would



MEPs want pictures of blackened lungs on cigarette packets

replace the legislation that was overturned by the European Court of Justice in October because the judges did not believe it had a sufficiently sound legal base. □