

MONDAY, JANUARY 15, 2007 13

A place for caution in research

DAVID MOYES

WHO should decide what the limits are for science? That's the question raised by the Government's proposed revisions of the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, published last month.

The drive to facilitate research into possible treatments for diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and motor neurone disease is such that the Government has been lambasted by a small group of influential scientists for its reluctance to consent to the creation of part-human, part-animal embryos.

This Government has recognised that animal-human hybrids pose dramatic and as yet unanswered questions. When an embryo is formed from an animal egg with human DNA, is it a human embryo or an animal embryo? This is not just a theoretical question. Article 18 of the European Convention on Biomedicine and Human Rights prohibits the creation of human embryos, but not animal embryos, for research purposes. Furthermore, millions of people in the UK believe that human embryos are human beings with the same or similar values and rights.

The science lobby also recognises these unanswered questions, but points out that less than 1 per cent of the DNA of these embryos would be non-human. However, this is not the same as the embryo being "99 per cent human". DNA does not work like that.

There are also questions as to the value of this kind of research, which has been proposed by three separate research centres in the UK, including Edinburgh. There are things almost everyone would never want to see happen, such as destructive experiments on newborn babies. So there must be limits to our quest for medical progress.

The fact that the UK Government has not easily acquiesced to the demands of scientists suggests there is a healthy caution in our regulatory processes. Less encouraging is the indignant tone with which the Government's decision has been met. It is worrying that a very small group of scientists, who dismiss the 535 responses the Government consultation received, expect their numerically far smaller response to be given more weight. The scientific community cannot expect to regulate itself on matters so significant for the rest of society.

The fact that the Government is providing some counterweight to the drive for biotechnology advances is reassuring, given that the UK Government has already become ethically isolated internationally with its lack of ethical steering.

Everyone would be delighted to see treatments developed for debilitating diseases. But there is a counter-pressure on all human activity – the pressure to make sure our actions do not disregard medical ethics, and the value, rights and well being of other people. The Government has previously allowed the latter pressure to be ignored in the face of increasingly insistent, well-organised and well-funded lobbying from biotech scientists. There are pressing reasons not to permit animal-human hybrids, reasons that cannot be thrown aside because of potential – not to say unlikely and far off – benefits, and so the Government's current circumspection is sensible and responsible.

■ *David Moyes is a research fellow with the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics.*