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# Scientific community cannot always expect to regulate itself

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WHO should decide how to regulate the creation of animal-human hybrids? The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority has recognised that animal-human hybrids pose dramatic and unanswered questions and has launched a public consultation.

When an embryo is formed using an animal egg in which human genetic material is inserted, does it come under human or animal legislation? This is not just a theoretical question. Article 18 of the Euro-

## Platform

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pean Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine prohibits the creation of human, but not animal, embryos for research purposes.

The science lobby recognises these unanswered questions, but points out that less than 1 per cent of the genetic material of these hybrid embryos would

be non-human. However, this is not the same as the embryo being "99 per cent human". Genetics does not work like that. Indeed, 75 per cent of the genes of a human are the same as those of a mouse. Very small amounts of genetic material can be vastly significant.

It is unfashionable to argue for restrictions and limitations, but there are things almost no one would ever want to see happen, such as destructive experiments on new-born babies. So there must be limits to our

quest for medical progress. The promise of a cure does not trump all ethical considerations and the need for science to respect such limits is clear.

Millions of people in the UK believe human embryos have the same or similar values and rights as born humans. It is therefore reassuring that the government is providing some counter-weight to the drive for biotechnological advance, given that it has already become ethically isolated from an international perspective be-

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cause of its lack of ethical insight.

There is a certain contradiction in the pro-science lobby's arguments. It affirms the need for regulation in order to gain public support but resists ethical boundaries, arguing that legislation needs to reflect changing views as people become more tolerant of what was once controversial. In other words, it claims regulations safeguard against further pushing back of boundaries, yet argues boundaries must be moveable.

The fact that the 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 this has been met. It is worrying that many scientists expect their views to have priority over all others. The scientific community cannot expect to regulate itself on matters so significant for the rest of society.

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