

Scientific and moral needs must be balanced in stem-cell legislation

THE discovery, announced last week, that human skin cells have been reprogrammed to mimic embryonic stem cells with the potential to become any tissue in the body will have profound repercussions on the new Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill that is currently going through the Westminster parliament.

This is because the breakthrough promises a plentiful new source of stem cells for research into new treatments for diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's - research that is no longer dependent on using cells from human inter-species



embryos, which has proved highly controversial from an ethical perspective.

The Westminster parliament has the following options:

- It can decide not to create certain kinds of human-animal embryos because it cannot, as yet, deal with the ethical consequences which they initiate.
- It can decide to create certain

kinds of human-animal embryos and kill them before they develop to any advanced stage because society cannot, as yet, deal with the ethical issues that these embryos pose.

In this case, there is also the risk of killing a living entity - out of prejudice - which may be entitled to full moral status. This is the position taken by

the present bill going through Westminster.

■ It can decide to create certain kinds of human-animal embryos and allow them to develop to term. However, society may then agree that they should never have been created due to biomedical developmental defects or societal inequalities and prejudice.

In order to decide between these alternatives, it may be useful to consider the ethical concept of proportionality, which examines the benefits against the disadvantages of a certain procedure. In other words, if a procedure, such as the creation of inter-species em-

bryos, results in very serious offence being taken by a significant section of society, and if the procedure has only a limited potential compared with new alternatives, then no valid reason exists for the procedure to be considered.

Thus, in the light of this concept of proportionality, it may be appropriate to redraft the bill. This is because many grave concerns about the moral status of these inter-species embryos have already been expressed.

For example, the two major Christian denominations in Scotland have strongly opposed the bill's proposals to create animal-human embryos.

Society has a responsibility to make a choice between alternatives which seek to cause the least offence among its members. In this regard, it is possible that some individuals who hold a scientific-reductionist perspective may not understand what all the trouble is about, since they may consider inter-species embryos as just piles of cells with no moral status.

However, many would disagree with such a stance, and this may be a case where a certain amount of humility and respect is required towards the views and sensitivities of others, even though they may seem to be unscientific.