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British religious leaders critical of vote to allow embryo research  
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By Martin Revis

London, 21 May (ENI)--Some British religious leaders have criticised a new law that will allow scientists to conduct research on diseases such as Alzheimers and Parkinsons by using hybrid embryos that combine human and animal DNA, after the UK parliament rejected a ban on such a procedure.

An amendment proposing a ban was substantially defeated on 20 May by members of parliament during two days of debate on the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill. Lawmakers also rejected a proposal to cut the upper time limit for abortions from 24 to 22 weeks, and for doctors to consider the need for a "father and mother" before allowing IVF treatment to lesbian couples.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, who led a campaign against the new law, told Britain's Channel 4 TV, "It is strange that a government should pass a law denying a child the right to a named father. The cement of society is the family, and the presence of a father and mother."

The cardinal had earlier called for the establishment of a bioethics commission of experts to study all the implications of embryo research. He said that Britain as a whole was becoming aware that 200 000 abortions a year was not only sad but also very wrong.

Ian Lucas, co-ordinator for pro-life groups demonstrating outside Parliament, said lawmakers had voted against the wishes of three quarters of the population, who he asserted wanted a reduction in the time limit for abortions.

Dr Malcom Brown, director of Mission and Public Affairs for the (Anglican) Church of England, said, "Any erosion of the unique moral status of the human embryo opens the door û if only a crack û at the top of a 'slippery slope' to treating human beings as less than ends in themselves."

Mohammed Shafiq, director of the Ramadhan Foundation, a British Muslim youth organization, said, "I am horrified that the rate of abortions has increased drastically to levels not seen before.

The foundation urges MPs to vote against it and protect human life. We respect pro-abortion views but strongly disagree with them on the basic principle of our faith that human life is sacred and should be protected."

The proposed law places a responsibility on the research community, as well as those who draw up the regulatory frameworks, to keep the boundary of 14 days for the use of embryos for research purposes, and other ethical restraints on the use of embryos.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, made no immediate comment on the vote, though he had written in the Daily Mail newspaper before the vote that he thought the measures relating to non-reproductive cloning could open the way to a less respectful attitude to life, and to a person being treated primarily as a tool to another's ends.

In an article in Britain's The Observer newspaper, Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who is a member of the Church of Scotland, described research using animal-human hybrid embryos as an "inherently moral endeavour" that could save millions of lives.

"Should children who face death or critical illness find new hope in scientific advances that would allow their new brother or sister to be not just a blessing to their family but also a saviour sibling to them? And should people be able to approach IVF clinics without fear of discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation? My answer to those questions is an unequivocal 'Yes'," Brown said. [592 words]

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Ecumenical News International  
PO Box 2100  
CH - 1211 Geneva 2  
Switzerland

Tel: (41-22) 791 6088/6111

Fax: (41-22) 788 7244

Email: [eni@eni.ch](mailto:eni@eni.ch)