

# Senators' bill would OK stem cell studies: Cloning would be banned

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A group of U.S. senators has a proposal it says will alleviate fears of stem cell research. But critics say it would do just the opposite.

A bipartisan group of senators introduced legislation April 21 banning “human reproductive cloning” while simultaneously allowing embryonic stem cells to be used for medical research.

Proponents hope the proposal can walk the delicate line between scientists who maintain that access to the stem cells is vital to advancing health care and some conservative groups that fear such research debases the sanctity of human life.

“Stem cell research—particularly embryonic stem cell research—holds great promise,” said Utah Republican senator Orrin Hatch, one of the chief cosponsors of the bill. “[It] could potentially be the scientific advance that takes the practice of medicine not just to the next level, but to five or ten levels above and beyond.”

The legislation endorses somatic cell nuclear transfer, in which scientists inject a cell nucleus from a body cell into an egg from which the nucleus has been removed—the same process Scottish researchers used to clone Dolly, a ewe, in 1996.

The bill would restrict development of these cells to 14 days and impose strict penalties on those who violate that restriction. In addition to serving ten years in federal prison, violators would be subject to a fine of at least \$1 million.

“Medicine must advance hand in hand with ethics,” said Senator Edward Kennedy (D., Mass.), another cosponsor. “And the legislation we introduce today will make certain that American research sets the gold standard for ethical oversight.”

Proponents say the bill will prevent what they call human reproductive cloning, but the bill’s critics maintain that the very process it advocates is itself a form of cloning. “This bill is not a cloning ban,” said Douglas Johnson, legislative director of the

National Right to Life Committee. "It is a bill to foster and legitimate human cloning."

Opponents say the 14-day development limit is 14 days too many. "Since these are still living members of the species homo sapiens, we don't think the government should be involved in the research that will kill them," Johnson said.

Meanwhile, the National Academy of Sciences on April 27 proposed ethical guidelines for research with human embryonic stem cells. The academy advises the government on scientific matters, and in this case said it was volunteering guidelines in light of the Bush administration's limited leadership on the issue.

States such as California are creating ambitious stem cell research centers. The National Academy of Sciences recommended, among other things, the establishment of a system of regional and national committees to review such studies. *-Religion News Service*