

# Top Scientists Warn Against Cloning Panic

## Recreating Humans Would Be Unethical, Experts Say

By Curt Suplee  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Numerous scientific experts—including the Scottish researcher whose team was the first to clone an adult mammal—yesterday warned Congress against legislating prematurely on the subject of human cloning, lest a hasty, ill-drafted law stifle promising biological research.

Ian Wilmut of the Roslin Institute in Scotland told a crowded Senate hearing that cloning humans would be "unethical" and "quite inhumane." His group, Wilmut said, "would welcome any efforts that could be made on an international basis" to ban the practice before it occurs.

But he urged that new laws should "preserve opportunities to take advantage" of advances in gene manipulation, and not "throw out this particular baby with the bath water" by overreacting to the cloning news. Unduly restricting inquiry, Wilmut said before the Senate Labor and Human Resources subcommittee on public health and safety, could severely hamper progress toward gene therapies for Parkinson's disease, cystic fibrosis and other maladies, as well as fundamental discoveries in the way cells specialize.

Although world opinion has been galvanized by reports of the cloned sheep named Dolly, "the discussion is actually running ahead of the science," said Harold E. Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health. The prospect of human cloning is extremely remote at present, Varmus said, because the techniques used are "extremely difficult, inefficient and not established in species other than sheep." As a result, "we're not in a moment of crisis."

Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), a transplant surgeon, had convened the hearing to "explore all of the medical, social and ethical implications" of the cloning technique.

Three hours of testimony by 10 witnesses produced considerable unanimity. Nearly all panel members—including three bioethicists and three representatives of biotechnology enterprises—concurred that human cloning would be reprehensible but that exploitation of new gene-manipulation techniques holds extraordinary promise.

In fact, the principal dissent came from Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), who insisted that it was "utter nonsense" for government to try to regulate scientific inquiry.

"I don't think there are any appropriate limits to human knowledge—none whatsoever," Harkin said, and compared the sudden spasm of revulsion at the possibility of human cloning to the Vatican's attempt to suppress the work of Galileo in the 17th century. "Some would have us believe that Dolly is a wolf in sheep's clothing," he said, but "human cloning will take place in my lifetime and I don't fear it. I welcome it."



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

Ian Wilmut, the Scottish researcher whose team cloned an adult sheep, testifies at Senate.

Several witnesses expressed similar sentiments. "I hope that you are wrong," Wilmut told Harkin, because "I have never heard of a potential application" of cloning—including cases in which parents lose their only child to disease—"that I would find ethically acceptable."

James A. Geraghty, president of Genzyme Transgenics Corp., a Massachusetts biotechnology firm, emphasized that "everyone in the biotechnology industry shares the unequivocal conviction that there is no place for the cloning of human beings in our society."

George Annas, a health law expert from Boston University, agreed with Harkin that it was difficult to control science, but stressed that "novelty is not always the same as progress." The Dolly debate provides an ideal opportunity "to establish a new regulatory framework" for directing medical experimentation, he said.

But any such framework, several experts cautioned, would have to be very carefully crafted to avoid having a debilitating effect on research. For example, R. Alta Charo of the University of Wisconsin, a member of the National Bioethics Advisory Committee, explained that the central accomplishment of the Scottish team—placing the genes of a fully developed adult cell into an egg that has had its nucleus removed and then generating a viable embryo from the combination—posed new and troubling problems for federal rule-making.

Because "any cell in an adult body [can now] be regarded as equivalent to a fertilized egg," she said, government may have to reconsider the kinds of restrictions it places on "fertilized eggs, embryos and our bodies in general."

In addition, Varmus said, laws will have to be meticulously worded so that they do not prohibit various life-saving technologies. For example, he said, a law that made it illegal to place the contents of one human cell into another would eliminate many kinds of gene therapy.

Wilmut said that genetic manipulation, within two or three years, would enable his lab to create animals that "produce in their milk proteins that can treat human disease." And John Wallwork, a transplant surgeon at Papworth Hospital in Cambridge, England, said that continued research is necessary to make transgenic animals that can provide a source of compatible organs for humans, ending what he called a transplant lottery system "that relies on a well person to die in order for a sick person to live."

WASHINGTON POST MARCH 13, 1997

Washington Post March 13, 1997 A3