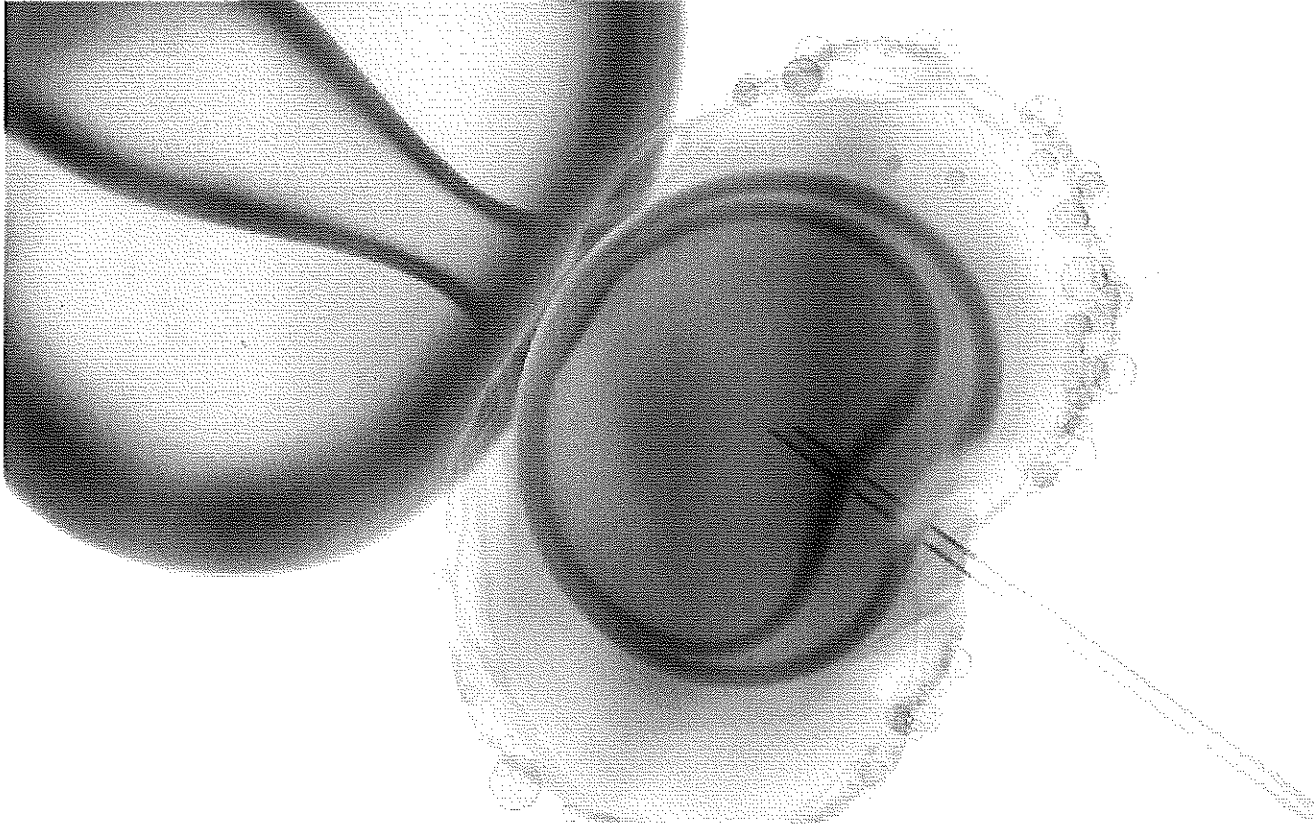


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Three parent babies 'incompatible with human dignity'

Allowing the creation of babies with DNA from three biological parents in Britain is "incompatible with human dignity" and tantamount to eugenics, members of the Council of Europe have claimed.



In the future, all clinics will have to publish the number of complications suffered by their patients. Photo: ALAMY

By Nick Collins, Science Correspondent

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A group of 34 European politicians, including eight British MPs and peers, has signed a declaration attacking plans which will make the UK the first country in the world to permit the new IVF technique.

Under legislation being drawn up by ministers the treatment will be offered to a handful of parents at high risk of having children with conditions such as muscular dystrophy, as early as next year.

The therapy can dramatically reduce the risk of children inheriting disorders of the heart, brain and muscle which are caused by faults in the mother's mitochondria, structures which supply power to cells.

But it has proved controversial because it involves substituting a small fraction of the mother's damaged DNA with that of a healthy female donor.

Because the swap takes place at the "germ line", the third party's DNA would not only be passed on to the child, but also to any future generations down the female line.

The therapy was recommended to government by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority earlier this year after a public consultation revealed general support.

Doctors developing the treatment have emphasised that the DNA in question lies outside the nucleus of the cell and will have no bearing on the child's personality or appearance.

But a declaration made by members of the Council of Europe, a human rights and ethics organisation made up of politicians from across Europe, strongly condemned the decision to permit the technique.

The declaration proposed by Jim Dobbin, a British Labour MP, which compared the technique to a "eugenic practice", was signed by 34 members of the human rights organisation's 318-strong parliamentary assembly.

It said: "The undersigned members of the Parliamentary Assembly affirm that the creation of children with genetic material from more than two progenitor persons, as is being proposed by the United Kingdom Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, is incompatible with human dignity and international law".

It was signed by five other Labour MPs and peers as well as Edward Leigh, a Conservative MP, and the Earl of Dundee, a hereditary peer along with politicians from twelve other nations.

The declaration, in effect a statement of opinion by the signatories, does not reflect the view of the whole Council but could now become the subject of a full debate or report.

Mr Dobbin told the *Telegraph*: "Animal models have not been 100 per cent successful and have left some damaged individuals so to try this in humans at this stage, in our view, is not very clever.

"Essentially we are saying the HFEA is overstepping its mark here."

Prof Ian Wilmut, the geneticist who cloned Dolly the Sheep, explained that the only effect of the

DNA transfer would be to make the child healthy, and that in all other ways the child would be “the child of the couple”.

“This simple procedure will make it possible for couples to have healthy children, who otherwise might not,” he said. “Without this help there is a serious risk that the child will die or suffer serious illness.”

Alastair Kent of Genetics Alliance UK, a charity for people with genetic conditions, added: “It seems a shame that people who are not directly affected by these conditions are making comments which are castigating the wishes of parents who live with the prospect of having a child who will die.”

Mark Henderson, speaking for the Wellcome Trust which helped fund the research behind the technique, said the technique could “give affected families the chance to have children free from devastating disorders who can grow up to have healthy children of their own, something most of us take for granted”.

A spokesman for the HFEA said that it had found “broad support” from the public during its consultation, but added: “The ultimate decision about whether these techniques will be made available to families rests with the UK Parliament.”

Professor Doug Turnbull, who has led the research at Newcastle University, said: “This is good example where the needs of patients has been carefully considered alongside the ethical aspects and the UK government should move forward with the legislation.”

How we moderate

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