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News

Newcastle centre gains licence for therapeutic cloning

Stephen Pincock *London*

The United Kingdom has granted its first licence for researchers to create human embryonic stem cells by means of cell nuclear transfer, otherwise known as therapeutic cloning, prompting excitement among scientists—and anger among pro-life groups.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) granted the licence on 11 August to Professor Alison Murdoch and Dr Miodrag Stojkovic at the Newcastle Centre for Life, who will use the stem cells they generate to research diabetes, among other diseases.

"After careful consideration of all the scientific, ethical, legal, and medical aspects of the project the HFEA licence committee agreed to grant an initial one year research licence to the Newcastle Centre for Life," said the authority's chairwoman, Suzi Leather.

Reproductive cloning to create babies is illegal in Britain, but therapeutic cloning is allowed, under strict guidelines. "The HFEA is there to make sure any research involving human embryos is scrutinised and properly regulated," Ms Leather said.

In cell nuclear replacement the nucleus from a human ovum is removed and replaced with

that of another cell, such as a skin cell. This egg is then stimulated to divide until a group of cells form. The Newcastle upon Tyne researchers are allowed to do the procedure with skin cells taken with permission from women undergoing routine gynaecological procedures and from existing stem cell lines, the HFEA's head of research regulations, Dr Chris O'Toole, said.

"The potential this area of research offers is immensely exciting, and we are keen to take the work we've done so far to the next level," said Professor Murdoch. "Realistically, we have at least five years of further laboratory based work to do before we move to clinical trials, but this could be reduced if we receive additional funding which would allow us to increase the size of our team."

Many researchers welcomed the decision as an important step forward. Dr Ian Wilmut from the Roslin Institute, near Edinburgh, said he was delighted.

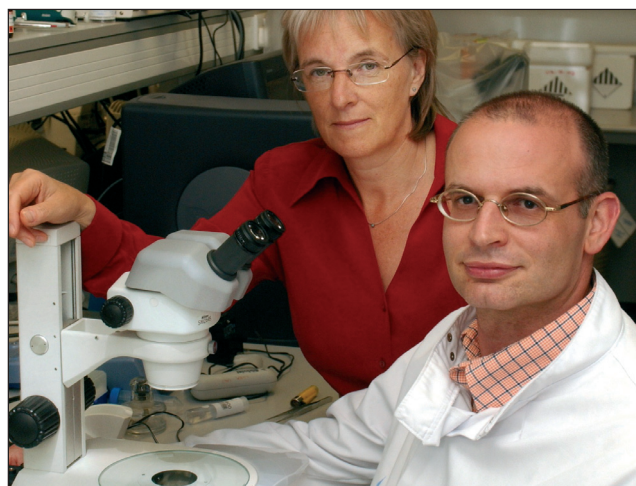
"I believe that cells derived from cloned embryos will be very important in research, as well as in the treatment of disease," Dr Wilmut said. "There are many unpleasant human

diseases that reflect the loss of cells that are not replaced; these include Parkinson's, diabetes, spinal cord injury, and some forms of blindness. There is no fully effective treatment for many of these diseases, and so the exciting new approach of transferring new cells into patients is very important."

However, anti-cloning and pro-life groups were angered by the move. "This is a deplorable further step down the slippery

slope. We should be ashamed of it," said Professor Jack Scarisbrick, chairman of the charity Life.

Meanwhile, in an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* last week (2004; 351:627-8), Dr George Daly from Boston's Harvard Medical School bemoans the harm done to stem cell research by US government policies, which prevent federal funding of cell lines derived after 9 August 2001. □



Professor Alison Murdoch and Dr Miodrag Stojkovic of the Newcastle Centre for Life have been granted the first UK licence to conduct therapeutic cloning

Chairman says he declared interest

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

The chairman of the UK joint committee on vaccination and immunisation has defended his position over the new "five in one" childhood vaccine after media reports of a potential conflict of interest over links with its makers.

Professor Michael Langman said: "Available public statements make clear that all proper

procedures have been followed."

Media reports of a potential conflict of interest centre on his declaration of a non-personal interest in Merck, Sharp & Dohme, joint owners of Aventis Pasteur MSD, one of the makers of the new vaccine. (14 August, p 365)

Professor Langman, former dean of medicine at the Universi-

ty of Birmingham who is currently employed by the university on a part time basis, registers a non-personal interest in Merck, Sharp & Dohme, as well as in AstraZeneca and Novartis, on the joint committee's website under the heading "industrial support."

The interest in Merck, Sharp & Dohme relates to funding that goes to Birmingham University and which includes support for a clinical trial in colorectal cancer.

A Department of Health spokesman said, "Professor Langman has not received any

personal benefit from Aventis Pasteur MSD since becoming chairman of JCVI [the joint committee on vaccination and immunisation]. He has declared all his interests in strict accordance with the code of practice.

"The code makes clear that in such cases of non-personal interests, it is not necessary for people to stand aside from the work of the committee. The funding from this goes straight to his university and includes support for a clinical trial in colorectal cancer." □